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THE GOSPEL OF SOMETHING OR  
OTHER /  
CRITICAL MASS

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Doctor of Philosophy (English Literature)

School of Critical Studies

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## Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two components: a creative work of fiction and a critical analysis of the fiction through a discussion of craft and creative influence. The creative section, the novel *The Gospel of Something or Other*, is a formally experimental work that explores authenticity – of both narrative and voice – authorial identity, the performativity of grief and sincerity, and the aesthetic function of narratological failure.

The critical section of the thesis, *Critical Mass*, analyses the work of David Foster Wallace and James Wood in relation to the aforementioned fiction, discussing aspects of craft most relevant to the novel: the function of comedy and the function of manipulation. The critical piece investigates the extent to which influence can be identified in the creative process and the unstable relationship between critical interpretation and authorial intent.



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And to Tracie Bell





*The Gospel of Something or  
Other*

# Part One

## Chapter One

If I'm reading Freud correctly, there's a problem with having too many television channels. Maybe you disagree, but I think the period of four terrestrial choices was a high point in recent history. We were mostly on the same page in those days. Or at least we knew what page everyone else was on. An example: when I was an adolescent there was an event of real horror and sadness in school, my neighbourhood, even at home (albeit briefly). Two boys close to my age – actually a little younger – kidnapped and murdered a toddler only a couple of miles from where I grew up. They took him from a shopping centre – he was waiting outside a butcher's for his mother, playing on a small mechanical racing car ride – and led him for several miles along a canal to a remote stretch of train track, where they beat him and stoned him to death. For a while, it felt like the news of the crime was the only thing there was, that the concentration of energies was dedicated solely to this young boy's suffering, his family's suffering, and the psychology of the perpetrators. The benefit of perspective, the cult of understanding everything over time, eventually concluded it was not a premeditated act but a moment of waywardness that reflected back onto society. They haven't been forgiven, exactly, but only really exist these days as grave images: two static, half-formed faces, smiling, ignorant, angels about to fall. Theories, if not reasons: the violence of cinema, nurture over nature, education gone to the dogs. Still, for a little while there was a kind of communal mourning and disbelief that you just don't get anymore. Everyone watched the same news report at the same time, you just knew. People still get sad but, let's be honest, it's not like it used to be IRL.

I just had to look up the word 'aftermath': turns out it's originally a kind of agricultural term for the regrowth of grass after harvesting. It's not the perfect word for my experience but, if I think on it for a while, none ever are. I'll persevere. In the aftermath of the murder many immature imaginations found focus: in the playground the two boys were devils, cartoon villains to be slain. We shouted over each other the elaborate ways we might've stopped the terrible thing, sometimes by persuasion but most often by force, described the imprecise, implausible things we would do to the killers, the tortures we'd inflict. It was our first experience with one-upmanship. I had a particular talent for it, I think, because of the foresight to incorporate local items into

the story: the rusty pencil sharpener mounted to Miss Marsh's desk in 3A; the vice and coping saw in the CDT room. I was specific where others were general. It was a difficult time for me personally, so the attention and praise I received was appreciated.

I've been advised to begin less frenetically than I'm normally inclined. In one way or another, at one time or another, everyone you'll meet ahead has told me to calm down, take a moment, compose myself. Everyone but Emily. My failures, both as a comedian and a man, can be traced back to my tendency to assume people are *with me*, on my side, etc. And I think one my tragedies, despite how hard I resist, is that I'm fated to misjudge a room, whether it's filled with an audience and I'm up on stage, or if I'm sitting opposite you with nobody else around.

And, in case you're wondering, the reason people get into comedy isn't because they want to make a human connection or relate to another consciousness. This is a common misconception. It's not so much the whole 'tears of a clown' thing, either, although there's definitely something in that idiom. Sorry to be a downer, but the real and compelling reason we stand on a stage and whore ourselves for laughs from strangers is another kind of addiction: to pretending there's no such thing as death. The drug is delusion and the high is an immortality buzz. As these things often go, you end up chasing diminishing returns.

So this is all to acknowledge I've never been the best opener. Beginnings are infuriatingly open to possibility, which, if I'm still reading Freud correctly, is a problem I don't face alone. For a long time this story began with the following sentence: "*In my mania I wrote a novel.*" You never really pick up on your own bombast straight away, but what made me uncomfortable was its disingenuousness: it's both a tease and a tyrant, a context and tone that isn't really true. I couldn't find myself in it. My second opening was "*Night has an odd companion, a cool-air silence that belies the truth there is never nothing happening.*" This one's a boy, an exhibitionist: all he wants to do is pull down his trousers and flash his thing at you. But he's the craven sort: there's nothing to see but the smooth skin-tone patch of a plastic toy soldier. And the third: "*Broken by dew's weight, the strands of a spider web flirt with the sun while the coffee heats, steaming under the window, storming at the pane.*" I think I stole this, in desperation, looking for something catchy and grave, which seems the appropriate register for anything these days.

The reason for my difficulty, my failure, is that I know it shouldn't be me but Emily that opens, for she is both the crux and the conclusion of what follows. I've come to understand that some people have a gift that's less about telling a story than

understanding the texture of a word, what it does during the fractions of seconds before your interior dictionary classifies it, when it's just a sound searching for a memory. It almost doesn't matter what they say. But you have to be careful with the words and stories of others: interpretation and all. Before I give you Emily I'll give you everything else.

## Chapter Two

Something that's rarely noted about the rolling dung beetle is that the dung for which they dedicate the majority of their waking life is almost exclusively the product of animals other than themselves. Maybe this goes without saying, I don't know, but it struck me as curious when I read about it online—someone in the AOB section of [wrestlenow.net](http://wrestlenow.net), a forum I frequent, posted a link to a short documentary and article about how the beetles live now and their relevance in ancient Egyptian history. There's all sorts of interesting stuff to be learned from a cursory reading of the lives of the dung beetle – that not all are rollers, that they navigate the world based on the alignment of stars and planets, that there's such a thing as a 'burrowing owl' – but rarely, if ever, does the coleopterist or the enthusiastic amateur pause to ruminate on the essential fact of those little dung balls: it's the shit of others. You might guess I've identified a potential metaphor here, or even a full-on allegory (their method of rolling blindly, pushing with their hind legs whilst facing the ground, often results in them losing a sense of direction, which is particularly pertinent to storytelling, for example), but it's actually the opposite of that. You see, the bigger the dung ball the more it's likely the chap rolling it will find himself a lady with which to reproduce. I suppose that could still be a metaphor, although not in this case. My point is that even the strangest animal activities tend to have purpose. As far as I'm aware we're the only creatures that do something for nothing.

When I was young I had several 'uncles' who were stand-ins for my absent father. They had names like Ali, Allan and Zenon, and came and went, sometimes literally passing each other on the doorstep. Only one, we'll call him Main Uncle, imparted wisdom. Once, catching me playing a kind of ad-hoc hopscotch in the square patterns of the kitchen lino, he rubbed his seemingly tattooed-on perma-stubble and said "[don't do something if there's] no f-king reason [to do it]." Normally he'd just ask "why [are you being] weird?" I think it's stuck with me for so long because I seem to have spent an inordinate amount of time lately having to justify my actions.

Those who lack clarity in their convictions tend toward self-defence, protective elusiveness, evasion of meaning. I can't stand that sort of thing – muddled vagueness masquerading as mystery – so the next statement is an important one: I lack clarity in my convictions. More simply, I don't know entirely why I do certain things.

Which brings us to this story. The reason you're into chapter two already and nothing has even come close to happening is that it's been difficult for me to understand my motivation for writing these words. The writer, mentor and guru Bob Hawk – who I

discovered when looking for literature on grief at the local library – asks in almost all of his books “what’s at stake here??” It might be the most important question I’ve ever been asked.

Memory. That’s my answer: the memory of Emily. But I can only describe my endeavour in terms of what it isn’t: not an elegy or an obituary. Not a eulogy. It seems, to me, more appropriate to speak not of what a person did but of what’s left in their absence.

## Chapter Three

Full disclosure: I'll be referring intermittently to the writings of Bob Hawk from hereupon, as well as occasionally referencing the Checkhardt *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Techniques*, which doubles as a standard dictionary as far as I can tell. They'll hopefully help us make sense of what unfolds. If you take umbrage with either – a brief search online suggests many do – you might want to close this book, put it back where you found it. You don't have to let the lives in here become a part of your own. You know this, of course. You'd never have turned the page if you didn't. And thanks, by the way, for turning the page. I really mean it.

I'll mostly be using edition three of Bob Hawk's *The Divine and Apodictic Writer Within* (DAWW) to locate and stimulate my own DAWW (of which each of us are in possession) whenever he goes missing or sinks too deeply into my *Well of Excuses and Reasons for Repressing Divinity* (WERRD© - Bob Hawk).

The Checkhardt *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* provides an array of writing conventions that I can randomly deploy when I inevitably run short of inspiration. Perhaps "randomly" isn't quite accurate: I begin by opening it at random but this hardly ever yields a useful idea, so I continue randomly opening and closing the book until something strikes me as relevant. So it's actually a process of sorts, and exercise during the long hours when I'm otherwise inert, aside from coffee breaks, dog walking and afternoon naps (I tend to flail wildly during my naps, I'm told).

*The Divine and Apodictic Writer Within* enables me to reach down and pull my DAWW from the deepest WERRD, where, I've noticed, it often dwells, like a bloated worm in the nutrient-rich decay of rotting food (Bob Hawk recommends finishing any explicatory or technical sentence with a simile, satisfying readers like a sumptuous slice of black forest gateaux after a long meal of, say, smoked haddock, which tastes like sick). Many of Mr Hawk's methods each have their own individual copyrights in addition to the one at the beginning of his book, so, to be safe, I'll make reference to his advice whenever appropriate in my own text.

This is all just stuff I feel it's important to get out of the way.



## Chapter Four

I think it's disrespectful to attempt suspense in these situations, so I'll tell you upfront that Emily committed suicide; she hanged herself on March 2, 2012, was discovered four days later, and is the catalyst for everything that follows. *Discovered* is the wrong word. *Found* is better: the blunter the language the more appropriate. And *act* is wrong, too. Sometimes I think it should be *assault*, as everyone knows to commit suicide is to murder the entire world around you. Another word could be *gesture*. But it should just be *suicide*. I can't bear to look up any of the definitions. I've heard people say words lose any meaning when they try to deal with death. I find the opposite: words are like capacitors, filling and overflowing with intent.

I've compiled a few notes – things I've learned from pamphlets, the dictionary, stuff I've seen people do – on grieving/mourning a suicide. Maybe they might be useful for you.

First, decide if you're grieving or mourning. Remember, you can grieve the loss of a loved one and also the loss of a football match, even if some people think you're being dramatic. The varieties of grief are legion and people understand it in different ways. If you decide you're mourning there's a series of things that may be expected of you, things you don't have to do. You don't have to wear black; you don't have to receive visitors or be received as a visitor; you don't have to stop listening to music; you don't have to stop wearing jewellery; you don't have to maintain a dignified reticence or a wild, uncontrollable woe; and you don't have to feel certain ways on certain days, or to pretend not to feel certain ways on those days. But if you don't do all of these things you might not feel you're mourning properly. This might make you sad.

It's also worth mentioning that bereavement advice often comes from a religious perspective, although religion's relationship to suicide is a complicated one. Secular bereavement advice tends to replace the word 'God' with 'Hope' (often capitalised).

Finally (and this might already be obvious to you, although it wasn't to me), choosing to grieve is merely choosing to apply that specific word to your feelings. That's the only choice one has: to give your feelings a name, which, even if you work hard to find the right names, still seems like guesswork. What a hoax it is when you realise you've never been in control of your feelings: at best you're a taxonomist of emotions that are half-understood. Take GRIEF itself: the furthest I can go back brings me to the Latin *gravis*, which apparently means *weighty*: grief is weight, which sounds both accurate and not so much.

## Chapter Five

One of my major concerns ahead is how my voice comes across, an anxiety I've had my whole life. If I'm stood on a stage people will assume it's part of the comedy; off stage, loosed from context, my tedious monotone is almost funny. It's been an affliction since childhood—of the numerous examples that come to mind, I once lulled the local church priest, Father Gilday, into torpor during an altar boy interview. And, while I know that I'm not speaking these words to you, I still worry something of my dulcet drone lingers in the written word.

The Checkhardt definition of voice is “*See* NARRATOR; PERSONA; VIEWPOINT,” which is less than helpful. Am I thinking of *tone*, or *style*? Perhaps, but mainly I'm thinking of voice. If this is read with Woody Allen's voice in mind it will feel different to a reading with Marilyn Monroe's or Brian Blessed's. The NARRATOR entry in my Checkhardt implies that if I want more of a Woody Allen voice than a Brian Blessed, I should create it through the cadence of my language. However, if I just tell you to think of Woody Allen instead of Brian Blessed we'll save a lot of time. The 'concerns' in the first sentence of this paragraph becomes much funnier if you imagine Woody Allen, for instance.

There may also be some moments of gravitas ahead. I'll call these my *Blessed Bits*.

Example (Re. grieving/mourning a suicide): it was news to me that a person who commits suicide is called, in suicide terminology, 'a suicide.' You should watch out for that. And while most are aware of the common sentiment that death bequeaths rather than takes, that the bereaved gain *loss* and all its weighty irony, a suicide also forces recalibration, freights every memory with new meaning. Whatever your role was – friend, lover, child, parent – you are recast as a fool, oblivious to everything. (*Blessed Bit*)

(Early observation on the effect of a *Blessed Bit*: If you read a *Blessed Bit* in Brian Blessed's voice and then read the *Blessed Bit* notification at the end of the *Blessed Bit*, informing you you've just read a *Blessed Bit*, in the same Blessed voice, you'll notice the curious way the whole thing turns into a kind of snappy news report, or even a parody of a snappy news report. This is an unintentional structural problem that seems to undermine the stated intention of *Blessed Bits*.) (Woody Allen voice)

**Bob Hawk:** “Raymond Carver – ‘No tricks. Period.’” – Bob Hawk, *The Devine and Apodictic Writer Within* (DAWW), p2, reprinted in *Writing Yourself Out of a Hole: Creative Non-Fiction as Therapy* (co-written by Dr Ocean Hawk and Master Bob Hawk Jnr.) and *The Novel Untangled*, Hawk Press

## Chapter Six

At her suggestion, I once accompanied Emily to the Museum of Transport in Glasgow. It was a long trip north and she was upset to learn it was no longer located where she remembered from childhood, a family visit, moved at some point in those intervening years from the banks of the River Kelvin to the city's regenerated docklands on the banks of the Clyde. Inside, she spent a long time staring at a large display, an entire wall dedicated to pairs of old shoes.

After she died I went again, knowing it was illogical. Not even illogical, but senseless. I was somebody else, a different character. I went to the museum canteen and sat at the same unstable fibreboard table she'd chosen a year earlier. I ordered the same sour coffee, the cheap instant stuff that's so weak it takes on the flavour of its polystyrene container, faced the same direction. I began jotting down idle thoughts in the notebook I carry with me, how she looked like a frailer and prettier version of my wife. How she spoke like each word had been rehearsed. How she smiled when she overheard someone at another table use the word *stoical*, told me about Chrysippus dying from laughter after getting his donkey drunk on wine, Zeno killing himself after stubbing his toe, and how she'd then hold up her hands and admit Zeno didn't really go that way but that the story was too good not to tell. I wrote about the change in her voice, the excitement breaking through the measured sentences, the capillaries breaking through the pallor and flushing her cheeks. But this wasn't true; she never said any of those things. It was me who mentioned Zeno, reading about it somewhere and half remembering it. I tried to pass it off as knowledge I'd gained in some more genuine way, because things I've simply read about never seem like knowledge I've earned. Chrysippus never even came up. Why did I revise the story and give it to Emily? Why did I try to make her out to be more than she was? I don't know, but I was proud of my selflessness. It was my first attempt at keeping her alive.

I also have some less noble moments. For example, almost every night for the past month I've hired a taxi to drive me out to the middle of the Silver Jubilee Bridge at midnight. Not to jump, but to record the reactions and responses of taxi drivers as I exit the car and walk to the railings. Honestly, not to jump. It's my other ongoing project, an investigation into modern heroism vs. modern indifference, perhaps. Working titles include *Taxi Project*, *Crying Wolves/Howling at the Moon*, and *Catching Angels*.

## Chapter Seven

Normally my notebook is reserved for joke ideas but the most recent pages are filled with nothing but ruminations on Emily. I've written no jokes whatsoever, since my ignominy. You've met me past my peak. I was, up until about a year ago, on the verge of success as a stand-up.

I say *verge, success*. A fairer summation would be that I was almost solvent. Since my early 20s I've been slowly bleeding away a modest sum inherited from my aunt, my mother's sister: a house I sold far too soon before the bubble exploded, an expensive grandfather clock I've never managed to shift, and a few shares in Ford Motor Company, where my long dead biological uncle once worked. It kept me in comedy and marriage during the lean years. Then came a weekly compère slot, some booking responsibilities, and a salary of sorts. Then came the era of punchlines.

I began as a one-liner. It's the best way to ensure you're lonely in a full room. You should admire the one-liner comics you see, especially if they're any good. It's not easy to pretend each joke doesn't kill a little something inside when you tell it. Not that it's repetitive – there's lots of variance in the form – but you always know where the laughs will come, a little like a call-response liturgy. You say your bit and the room completes the deal. Not that I'd call myself a priest or anything. It's similar to receiving praise for something you've done plenty of times before: nice at first, but how long you can ride the wave says an awful lot about you.

My last time on stage – before my ignominy – was, I don't know, I should've taken it as a warning. I looked up FORESHADOWING in the Checkhardt and, while not quite that neat, it was something close.

So my last time on stage ended with a new joke I'd been working on for a few days. General rule, you end with new stuff. Never open a set or even begin a conversation with your most recent thought, as it's liable to go stupid in your mouth. The joke in question had no identifiable punchline, which was my thing. As I said, I was a one-liner to begin with. But my performance changed over the years. I became a kind of narrative comedian—stories rather than jokes. Trivialities mostly, my struggles with the everyday: I stood and told monologues of my life for people who had paid to laugh. It worked. Sometimes they seemed to be laughing before I began. I mined my past for moments of humiliation and explained them in great detail. I find nothing endears you to others more than being jaunty about your own misery.

The joke's setting was Friday evening in youth club when I was twelve: an older girl dangling a soggy red liquorice shoelace from her teeth like a retarded reptile, ordering me to take a bite, only to pull away as I tried. Behind her a group of friends

watching, laughing, some of whom I knew and had spoken to and shared lunchtimes and English classes and tennis-ball football with.

Is this Woody Allen voice? No, I don't think so. Anyway, I didn't get any further into the tale, for I made a mistake: at the point of describing her pulling her big head backwards (I spent a good three minutes on how parts of her body looked like various sea creatures, the crux of the joke being how such a slow, cumbersome and doltish girl could switch into something so lithe and cruel. Might I add that it takes real skill for a non-obese (I'm more like not-quite-obese today) comedian to joke about a fat girl and keep it funny, particularly in contemporary comedy. Even in previous decades it required the context of a mother-in-law or, sometimes, the wife herself, in order to be smuggled successfully onto the stage. The trick, if you're interested, is to work in the abstraction early and sustain it throughout. People quickly find themselves at ease with cruelty) as I leaned in and attempted to bite – so that my top teeth came down on the bottom set with an audible, hollow, pathetic crack – I stopped, paused, for a second too long. In that moment a kind of empathy crept into the room, each audience member heard, in that imagined sound, the empty echo of hurt or loneliness. I'd allowed the audience to think, a terrible mistake. Timing is everything. There was no laughter.

*Blessed Bit?*

## Chapter Eight

Let's play a game, she said. This is at the museum in Glasgow, sitting in the canteen, which has a nice view of an old cargo ship that's been turned into some other kind of museum. Pick a person, she said, one I can't see, and describe him for me. Remember, when you finish I'm going to turn around and guess who it is. So make it good. Okay?

Okay, well he's tallish, and slim. He has dark hair.

What else?

He's wear...

No! Describe *him*, not his clothes!

He's... he's average looking.

Great

He has a kind of stubble, like a three or four day growth. And his hair is short. No, it looks like he keeps it short, but it's grown out a little and is messy.

Like he's just woken up, or like he doesn't care?

Maybe both?

You can tell by his eyes.

I can't look at his eyes.

Why?

Holding another man's gaze for more than a moment is a certain type of signal.

Fine. His mouth.

He has an average mouth.

And what's average?

Well, it's...

What?

He has full lips.

[*Leans in*] Tell me more...

No, it's just that his top lip is plump, like a woman's.

He has a woman's mouth.

I think he does, but a man's stubble.

So there you go!

What? What did I learn?

That you'll eye-fuck a guy in a public place if I say so [*smiles*]



## Chapter Nine

That's the kind of humour I've always found attractive. My wife – and she is still my wife in the document sense – found it coarse to publically acknowledge the existence of sex, at least around me. Don't worry: this isn't going to be a woe-is-pour-me-another kind of thing.

Here's something I like from Bob Hawk:

"Let us acknowledge the elephant in front of the marble hearth right from the off: Reading a lump of prose is not in itself an enjoyable experience! You're asking someone to sit still and concentrate! A writer's gotta entertain from the go if a reader's gonna be interested. Your narrator has to be the kinda guy we all wanna shoot pool with, shoot the shit, go hunting. A story without an interesting narrator is like a hedgehog without spines: pointless!" *DAWW* (Hawk Press), p.1

I think that last line might be an original joke. More importantly, it's honest about the reality of this kind of transaction: I've always been inclined to a touch of windbagery, the bore at the bus stop, the one people are dismayed to find themselves standing beside at a party. I've never been able to figure out why the exact stories that receive mild-to-thighslapping laughter when told on stage can induce the silent wide-eyed *help me* and *how did this even happen* expressions in people during more common social settings. I think marriage might be to blame. I definitely recall being more entertaining as a bachelor.

The thing with the hedgehog, if I might demur slightly, is that I'd hope people remember the spines are there as a defence. They're very vulnerable little things without their armour.

I'll just have to be as honest as possible. When I was younger I exhausted myself with the lies I told. Or not told, more sustained—the telling was far too easy; keeping them straight is the real work. I don't have that kind of energy anymore. I won't claim any of this is interesting, but here's some stuff about me you might as well know:

Your author has taken up smoking cigarettes in the middle part of his life, not entirely his own decision, and now spends approximately £2900 on the habit per annum (an imported Romanian brand that come in packs of a roomy 19 or a cramped 21, never 20, 10% cheaper than anything else available in the UK, always flirting with dampness and almost impossible to keep taut and intact unless slipped into an elongated cigarette holder I'm not allowed to use). Your author is, since his ignominy, essentially unemployed (and also reliant on the occasional adverb to pad out a blunt

factual sentence, a kind of ambivalence or emphasis that seems necessary for some reason), and has some worrying financial concerns ahead. Your author's dog has recently begun staring at him with a distinct Grey Wolf resentment, the residue of 10,000 years of master-slave repression on her stupid little face (she actually has a beautiful little face, a bit like a seal pup). Your author's body is developing in ways more common to females in different ages/stages of panic (range 13-60): tits; hips; the slightest hint of what can only be described as a wattle where there was once a strong jawline; and, inexplicably, a cast of deep theatrical purple over the eyelids. Your author spends £3600 per annum (projected, under the circumstances) on low-grade cannabis purchased from his downstairs neighbour 'Jazz,' the closest thing to a friend he has (we'll listen to some Jazz later). Your author takes most/all of his national and international news from a wrestlenow.net (this is actually no bad thing: the AOB sub-forum doesn't just focus on dung beetle facts. It's much better than any site dedicated to reporting news, at least in that it doesn't pretend to be impartial). Your author's immediate impulse after masturbating is to imagine himself as an adored singer/songwriter or rock star with both critical credibility and commercial success—a fantasy to which he often gives up to (almost always more) an hour of each day. Your author's imaginings, now that he thinks about them, tend to occupy a significant amount of his time. Your author is developing a real terror of the outdoors, possibly Freudian. Your author doesn't laugh anymore. Your author doesn't sleep anymore. Your author has a weird black spermy thing incessantly wriggling around his left eyeball, and is increasingly unsure about the second-person as a rhetorical device worth anything.

## Chapter Ten

Bob Hawk recommends the work of Raymond Carver as the best template of how to write. I've tried but it doesn't fill me with inspiration. Don't get me wrong: Carver is good and all, and I'm not comparing myself to him, it's just that those spare, evocative sentences concern me. How can you be sure you're not omitting too much, evoking the wrong things?

I've had some moments recently. I think Emily's death expedited rather than caused a few decisions I can't easily unpack. One is the matter of Catholicism.

Whenever I read the nihilists I consider myself one of them. More specifically, whenever I read the introduction to *An Introduction to Nihilism* it makes perfect sense. So why have I been attending mass over the last few months? Certainly not to alleviate grief. Not for some sort of salvation buzz, either. All I can say for sure is nature played its part: the stilted sound of mechanical church bells carried by a slight breeze to my ears. As I've mentioned, I'm not wonderful outdoors, so it was a relief to hear a familiar sound from childhood, to be reminded of the weekly congregation, the pleasant frustration of wafer grafted to the palate, the lightness of soul that follows confession. Some people might sniff at *soul*, but any Catholic who as a child attended mass each weekend – and confession when they didn't – can attest to the soul growing heavier in the murky intervening weekdays—the build-up of sin (admittedly a broad term), every failure to turn the other, each covet, desire, theft: the bad things you do and the thoughts you can't seem to stop (sometimes the thoughts you never thought to think until you were told not to think them). Perhaps a non-believer would argue that it's merely a manufactured guilt, effective marketing. That's a good argument, although it's nothing compared to the barometric mental image that fixed itself in me as a boy: a revolving 33 on a turntable, each tiny groove pristine on the Sunday, slowly gathering dust at the tip of the needle as the week unfolds. By Friday the dust would be heaped up onto itself in a mess of half understood transgressions, turned into a clump of the indistinguishable grey stuff you find in a vacuum bag, hardly any of the beetle-black vinyl visible (when I discovered masturbation the record would be pretty much covered in grey fluff by Tuesday). I think the image had something to do with conflating the American phrase 'clean record' with 'clean slate,' blank slate, tabula rasa or whatever. After mass I'd have a beautifully polished LP turning steadily, the needle sharp and unobstructed.

See, I'd bet you anything Carver would just write "He'd been going to church again."

## Chapter Eleven

Quick note on the fact I've referenced masturbation twice in the last two pages: I've been trying to get into Freud over the past year. If I'm reading him correctly, I should probably be past the masturbation stage of my life, and certainly beyond the point of needing to mention it so regularly. The truth is, while not exactly possessing a high sex-drive, I certainly have a high orgasm-drive, and my frequent loneliness, boredom and solitude, means self-pleasure is an important aspect of my day-to-day stuff. If this comes across as gauche it might please you to know that I don't derive much pleasure from it at all.

So Freud's provided little solace on that topic, and has been no help whatsoever on what I'll call the issue of *Bill and I* (you're not to know, but this sentence is a momentous moment in my life—'Bill' has never had a name until just now). Soon I'll introduce you to Bill. I've been thinking about him for many years. Right now he's waiting. Bob Hawk says to find out about a character you need to put them alone in an empty room (see appendix 2, 4.8), so that's what I did: Bill's standing in the corner of a dark concrete cell and I can almost hear him breathing. I say I—perhaps it's more accurate to say 'I.' There's the 'I' that writes Bill's story, who is both I and not I, as it is I writing, but a slightly different I, I think, to the present I here, writing this. So there's that I, and then there's the I of Bill, who must be a *little* I, I suppose. But why is he Bill if he is really I? I don't know, and nor do 'I,' which is probably why Bill is 'Bill' and not 'I.' Working title: *The Three I's Monster*.

Sorry, don't fling me across the room just yet. It sounds more complicated than it really is.

## Chapter Twelve

I think Emily was a tolerant atheist, although it never came up. Like all thoughtful people she had some interest in Buddhism but was a little turned off when she learned more than the basics. I'm a militant agnostic who gets a little atheist-curious after a couple of beers.

So my return to church was not really spiritual. It's more that the format of Catholic mass is something I've always enjoyed, particularly the priest's homily, which feels like a jazzy middle 8 in between the rest of the liturgy. Since my ignominy I've missed the thrill of public performance, and the homily is the closest thing to stand up I could tolerate. Each Sunday Father Drummond links up the Gospel and two readings with something applicable to that week's news. He's a young priest with a pompadour hairstyle, and he's aware that Catholicism has to be clipped and pruned in all sorts of ways to keep a congregation interested (and most aren't, I have to report: the mass tends to drift by the majority of attendees, especially the young families, for whom the thirty or so minutes (one pruning method has been to shorten things a little) is a transferable segment in a day of keeping chaos contained, or at least that's what it seems like to me even if, as I write it, I'm aware of how I'm glossing over a multitude of potentially deep reasons for their attendance in order to make a quippy little observation, assuming a shallowness that may not exist. Or maybe I'm completely correct, as, as I said, that's certainly how it looks). So Father Drummond's homilies tend to address issues like finance, housing, homelessness, celebrity and crime, or whatever else might have been recently in the news, ensuring he keeps a generally conservative tone: don't think for a moment he's not aware of the community hall cabal of old biddies that are willing to crucify him (figuratively—I noticed growing up that the common reaction of elderly women unhappy with the diocese choice of priest is to bake him nicer cakes, which is Catholicism in a nutshell) if he puts a foot wrong, or his foot in his mouth. He's aware of it all, but it's a decent performance nonetheless—he knows what's in the charts each week, what's happening with the local podiatry services, but he also knows his Latin. All bases.

So far I've avoided attending confession with Father Drummond, although the time will certainly come.

## Chapter Thirteen

Bob Hawk again:

“It is almost impossible for a writer, especially an inexperienced one, not to write either a memoir or an autobiography. However, unless you’ve been held captive by pirates or achieved something in sports, your life story, told straight, won’t be very interesting! If your *Well of Useable Narrative Developments* is dry, don’t worry: you can still use your own life, but with a little tweak: try replacing the you of reality with the other of fiction. Pick another person to play the protagonist in your story, replacing your actions with his or hers. This method melds together your life and theirs, your story and theirs, so each turn in your plot, whether taken from your own life or theirs, can be addressed from a new angle.

“Here’s a story. When I was a young boy I stabbed my elder brother in the stomach with a corkscrew. Hideous! The corkscrew only went in a little, less than an inch, but left a “permanent scar”. When I wrote about the incident in *The Pope is Inflammable (and other misunderstandings)* (Hawk Press) I changed it so my brother and I were now two next-door neighbours observing the act through a gap in the garden fence. I transformed my experience into a fiction. The beauty of the technique was that I was able to see both sides of the story equally: instead of having to use a memory sullied with so many others – the history of my relationship with my brother, how he incessantly rubbed the faint white scar on his stomach any time there was an argument, how he seemed at the time to thrust himself *into* the corkscrew more than anything – my imagination stepped in to color the details. It became fiction. It became a new truth.” *DAWW*, p4

I keep coming back to this passage. It was the first thing I read of Bob Hawk, back in the local library when I was researching my grief. At the time it seemed to explain Bill to me perfectly, which has been an occupation of mine far longer than the telling of this story. It hasn’t quite turned out as well as I’d hoped, but it’s as close to truth as I’ve ever come.

## Part Two

## BILL ONE

Bill's mouth is sore. Jess, Emily's sister, is like an opera singer, or something from a Greek tragedy; perhaps neither, but as theatrical, less believable in a small room, close up. Emily is hanging by her neck from the ceiling in the suicide style. On the windows is a fading daylight, and the room is intermittently lit then darkened by the sad blue police siren outside, or the blue light that accompanies the siren. What do they call just the light without the sound? A streetlamp turns itself on, but its amber cast only dirties the air, lends a sickly pallor to each face. Why spend so much time noticing the hue? He cannot look up at Emily. Why no hue and cry? At-cha-hue, Bill sneezes, involuntarily taking the floor, the other heads in the room turning to face him, apart from Jess, who is blubbering at the wall, staining it with tears, saliva and mucus. And apart from Emily. The youngest police officer asks him about

- The book you're holding

The first word Bill recognises is 'you're,' the second, 'book'. He looks down at his hand as 'holding' catches meaning, sees his four fingernails squeezing flat and whitely. It takes a long time to turn the book—two words appear simple enough: *Collected* and *Poems*, a thick, powdery striation along the spine, bisecting the *C*, both *l*'s and obscuring the cross of the *t* and the bottom of *P*'s arc. It runs over the top of every other letter, except the *d*, which it meets at the brim of the loop in agreement. Instead of making the words difficult to read, the line adds a cursive elegance. How long?

Bill raises his head, realises he was almost bowing. The officer has a kind face that reminds him of old Hollywood films, or the warm feeling they evoked. Post-code, Bill thinks, unsure why. The officer reaches across the distance between them and takes the book, which Bill realises he has been holding to his mouth like a large sandwich or a very large harmonica. Does the officer have a helmet? Yes: the old domed sort that instigates the word 'bobby' and a memory of being chased; under the digging rim a left ear that sticks out big and red, as if straining to hear a call of distress. But why is he wearing it indoors? Another police officer, an old detective, asks Bill

- Is the book yours? Was it here when you arrived? You've been here before [?] Is this a book of Emily's?

Bill blinks, thinks he hears the suction of his eyelids opening back up—either because he blinked very slowly or because the room is so quiet, or that his imagination is adding



details. Maybe he nods at the questions, or shakes his head. He recognises the old detective's expression: an adult addressing a child.

Jess touches Emily, makes her swing slightly from left to right in a diminishing circle. The ceiling creaks in time with the motion, sounds like breaking wind. A beautiful white plaster powder falls slowly, some to the floor, other grains disappearing in their drift. Bill thinks it impossible something could disappear into nothing. Jess distracts him by contorting a face he cannot describe.

The young officer guides Jess away by the shoulder, saying that

- A medical team is on its way. They'll bring Emily to the coroner. My colleague will wait for them. In the meantime, I'll bring you both to the station. It's important that we don't disturb anything.

Bill forgets what *colleague* means. It sounds weird, or French. When he remembers, he notices it is referring to another person in the room. He screams or yelps, sort of jumps slightly off the ground, although he is sure it does not look like he jumped. The female officer standing next to him smiles in a way that seems angry about having to appear kind. Her face is squeezed-in, triangular. She is too close, but when Bill steps back he immediately regrets the action and looks away, anywhere.

Emily. A thick white electrical cable looped twice around her throat, knotted to the brass light fitting, heavily wrapped with masking tape. More tape at the base of the light, which has been pulled half away from the ceiling by Emily's weight; evidence either of an earlier audition or meticulous planning, neither thing Bill can think about for too long. He feels a draft from the small newly formed crack in the ceiling, wonders if this is what keeps two of Emily's thin and long blonde hairs floating above her shoulder. At the corners of her mouth tiny wafers of skin lap over one another like flower petals. A blue line stretches up her cheek and into her eye, where it blooms like a flower, too, but also like a firework.

Bill feels dizzy. Luminous blotches pulse in front of his eyes. The floor seems a lot closer, and Bill realises that he is fainting. He looks into the old detective's bloodshot stare and hopes to be saved, feels himself drifting upwards, alongside Emily, and watches as his body drops to the floor. Jess immediately follows him, more delicately and staccato, like a textbook example of a fainting person. Her head lands next to Bill's, their noses touching, an imperfect brown circle of dried blood on the carpet between their mouths.

## Notes on the Text

### PRETTY WHITE GIRL, D.O.A (gender concerns, no sculptor)

Easy to begin with a pretty young woman's death, many do. I'm not trying to play on some notion of the bruised hero and his fragile muse here, nor do I have any Pygmalionesque tendencies I need to work out. It just happens to be the beginning of the story. Nothing I can do about it, even though I wish I could.

### STORYTELLING (the failings of metaphor)

I spent a lot of time on the book of poems, the line on the spine, so much so that I think we need to get right into the business of METAPHOR. Consultation of the Checkhardt yields a surprisingly scant definition: *a figure of speech in which something is described in terms of something else*. It feels like there should be more to it than that. Perhaps the cracked spine is merely a TELLING DETAIL ("A brief detail that implies a broader theme within a text" – Checkhardt; "A man who involuntarily twitches when he hears a police siren" – Hawk, *DAWW*, p5)? Telling what? That Emily read the book many times, or made many visitations to the same page, a certain poem? But I don't know who the poet was (I could just make one up—no, that wouldn't be right. No tweaking). What if she bought it second hand and the cracks were made by somebody else? Is it then a detail that tells nothing? The whole thing balances on unknowable variables. Back to Bob...

### BOB HAWK SAYS (although we insist on nudity once inside Hawk House, robes and slippers are provided for the walk to and from the infinity pool, where the terracotta-tiled floor can get pretty hot what with all the lovely sun we have every day!)

"To summarise, we see detail not as a way to fool the reader, exactly, but to entice them, persuade them that the world you've created is good and true, that your words have life, that the page breathes, and that the gaps between each word, each letter, are where the reader falls into your story. A simple cup is more alive with a crack in it. A woman's face can be pretty, but a visible brushstroke of foundation across her cheek reveals a world of vulnerability. The threat of a penis is a thousand times greater if it throbs with a bulging vein." (*DAWW*, p4)

STORYTELLING (the potential of metaphor)

So some details are there to make a thing seem more real. I can believe this: Emily once told a story about sitting in the garden with her parents and sister as a child in South Africa. On its own I might not have been engaged, just a remote apartheid garden scene with a hint of marital discord in the clipped adult conversation, the sisters ignorantly flitting between different imaginary worlds. It's only her description of a rogue butterfly vibrating the air between family life that makes Emily's memory a memory of my own.

Does the book of poems improve the reality of the scene? No—maybe 'powdery' makes it seem more realistic. When I think of 'powdery' I can almost feel the white cracks across the spine on my fingertips, almost smell the old pages. But the book itself isn't a useful detail. I mean, the insertion of an unnamed book of poems into a story is pretty laden, which is what I think Bob Hawk means whenever he calls something 'literary'. Unless it represents something abstract, of course. Is it a metaphor for something after all? I mean, there's a simile there: "like a sandwich." Literature is food for thought, nourishing. Or Bill's going to consume literature, eat it and shit it out? I doubt Carver ever worried about this stuff.

BOB HAWK SAYS (my wives will be on hand to discuss your individual schedule 24 hours a day)

"The task of a metaphor is to reveal a new truth, whether an entire dimension of truth, or a previously shadowed edge. In that way, a metaphor is a linguistic torch, or a kind of dimension shifting machine: a linguistic dimension shifting machine.

Arguably the most successful metaphor in my own work can be found in most copies of *How to Write and Publish Contest-Winning Flash Fiction* (unfortunately not in the first two printings/recordings of the second edition, or any of the third editions—keep hold of them, though, as they might be worth something in the future!), one of my earliest audio-books:

Flash – as in 'in a flash' – as in 'to read in a flash:' your aim is to create a text for the morning coffee before work, the 11am toilet break, the television ad break, the few drowsy minutes before sleep. It is an enriching connection between two moments, a nutritious fruit for the mind.

"The strength of the metaphor is in its simplicity: the reference to a healthy snack of fruit, perhaps a juicy clementine, suggesting the bite-sized 'good for you' quality I

wanted to imply. I would never write clementine in this situation: the too-specific writer often muddles himself up if his metaphors are anything other than general. Think of a metaphor as similar to the small placards some museums use to describe a work of art: they only serve a purpose if they are clear, that their simplicity broadens an understanding of their subject, dissolves through erosion the huge mountains of stone at the edge-limit of your thought-scope. And as those placards appear either underneath or to the side of a work of art, your metaphor is most effective at the end of a sentence, where it doesn't have to jockey for position with other content, as it would if you jumped the gun and included it too soon." (DAWW, p2)

### STORYTELLING (flail better, flail worse, flounder/founder)

No (Woody Allen voice). There's no metaphor to be found here. The only thing worth knowing about a red herring is that it stinks. Well, that's not entirely true: the Checkhardt says red herrings were once used by escaped criminals to throw search dogs off a trail, although one has to wonder how an escaped criminal has the time to catch and smoke a fish.

Still: *something is described in terms of something else*. This seems both scant and yet quite important, maybe even essential: how can it be any other way?

### THE OLD DETECTIVE (when in doubt...)

I know I'd never make a good detective, in part because I've never been too concerned with being correct, which I assume is a standard character trait. There's also justice and legality, two notions I've always found to be quite disparate. But I like the image of the whiskey-worn grizzled detective figure. It's not hard to imagine his type: he'll have an ex-wife, maybe two. They'll still both love him, of course—the marriages only ended due to his dedication to work and his drinking, each feeding off and into the other. It's impossible the old detective could be unfaithful, we couldn't have that. They'll both be solid 8s while he's a 6, with a slightly droopy eyelid. But he'll be a personality 10 so it'll even out, apart from during his dark, ruminative silences, when he'll be like a -5. There'll be an unsolved case he never quite got over, a child or young woman or maybe one or more of each. Something about his presence on the page makes me feel safe. It might be that he can look out for Bill, that he won't let any harm come to him. And who isn't assured when the grey, experienced detective enters a scene, knowing and wise

and endearingly brusque? But his attitude towards my Bill was like someone who had just trodden dogshit all over his carpet. Although more serious in this case because it's a life and death sort of thing – or a death sort of thing at least – not a shit and carpet sort of thing. Point being the detective hasn't warmed to Bill like I wanted him to.

### THE PRESENT TENSE (parallax)

The Checkhardt says: *The present tense announces itself more readily than past tense. This is because people are reflexively uncomfortable in having themselves experientially tied to a character, unable to move past a character. It is most often used for shock or humour, rarely with success.*

If the future is impossible to imagine, and the past too terrible to recall, is the present all we have? If we fix ourselves to a resolute present are we not refusing the past and denying the future? Or are we actually acknowledging both, in an odd way? Should I end this entry with some sort of joke or simile? Is it a *Blessed Bit*?

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (flat characters and the imagination)

Is Bill realistic? He feels like some half-remembered boy from school, one who couldn't possibly contain the universe of emotions you deal with every second. Maybe he appeared thoughtful, observing the plaster falling from the ceiling (but that word 'beautiful' is troubling). Or maybe he seemed like the same boy at school you now remember a little more, who couldn't stop petting the class guinea pig, always a little too hard, and insisted ice cream was called *nice cream*. That's a very specific example. The boy I'm now thinking of was called Thomas Doran, a quiet, sort of bean-headed classmate of mine that I haven't mentioned because he's totally irrelevant to this story. His mother kept his hair cropped very close, possibly something to do with lice. During one-to-one reading time with the teacher (Mrs. Moyer, a talcum powder haired spinster who was still inclined to spank with a wooden ruler on occasion) I observed him attempt several times, when coming to the end of a page, to turn over two or three at once without being caught. He never succeeded, partly because of the strange habit he had of licking the finger of the opposite hand he used to turn the pages, drawing too much attention to the process. Bill certainly doesn't have anything to do with Thomas Doran, though, the poor dolt who took a ruler to the buttocks every Tuesday afternoon of year five.

### THE OLD DETECTIVE (when you assume)

Reading back, I've shown nothing of what I imagine the old detective to be like. I've just written the words 'old' and 'detective' down and carried on assuming the associations they initially spark in my own mind will be felt by you. Note: be better at CHARACTERISATION.

### THE PRACTICALITIES OF SUICIDE BY HANGING (weak structures)

The practicalities of suicide by hanging are complicated in modern buildings, which are often cheaply made and tend to perform their task (staying up, remaining to be buildings) poorly when bearing weight, as one realises when trying to fix a shelf to a plaster wall without the correct screw. One also suspects architects of modern buildings intentionally limit the potential for suicide by hanging. Compare the number of hanging points in an older building to that of a new. Modern architects appear conscious of the stigma a building can gain as a suicide location. Emily lived in an old tenement building with well-made light fixtures. I live in a new building or, at least, a newly built annexe. Everything is made of weak plasterboard that announces its hollowness whenever a door is slammed. I'd be seriously hurt if I tried to hang myself from the ceiling.

### THE THEATRICALITY OF THE BEREAVED (emotion on the outside, melodrama as understood)

As I understand it, the general rule is that the bleaker your economic reality the more theatrically you mourn. I find it distasteful when this is not the case, even if I only think it's the case because I've seen it that way on television. I found Jess's performance distasteful.

Although I must admit I have no idea why anyone fights against their tears. It's a weird convention and hurts a lot.

### THE PRACTICALITIES OF SUICIDE BY HANGING (catching the light, or not)

The suicide is making a scene. The suicide becomes a work of art. No, the hanging is a work of art. Methods of suicide: hanging, stabbing/cutting, jumping, stepping out,

electrocution, gassing, poisoning (overdosing), drowning, asphyxiation, starvation, dehydration. There are more. Some people kill themselves by forcing someone else to pull the trigger. Guns! There are more. But hanging is a dramatic art, a performance piece, and a truly successful hanging requires meticulous preparation. I imagine Emily prepared a little, but her angles were off: the police medic (I couldn't include it) said "looks like she tried to break her neck," implying failure (the word *tried*...). Instead she died from a squeezing of veins and arteries. Part of me envies the wondrous little euphoria I'm sure she felt before her brain switched off.

THE DRAMA OF FAINTING (melodrama not as an insult)

Speaking of, regaining consciousness after fainting is usually a euphoric experience, although sadly brief. And fainting is rarely dramatic. I've never seen a fainting person look anything other than calm, and they tend to lean and slump softly rather than fall. Sometimes, unfortunately, a fainter will urinate.

REPORT ON TAXI DRIVER REACTION TO MIDNIGHT DROP-OFF (in fairness his wedding band was worn thin)

Time: 00:12

State: Topsy

Company: AAA Taxi

Driver: Caucasian; 50-55; wide neck; polo shirt; Smooth FM;  
photograph of female 5-6y/o in school uniform

Car: Hard to tell

Conversation: None

Duration: 17 minutes

Fare: £7.40

Reaction: Questioned location x2; looked around exaggeratedly  
when pulled up; waited for minutes x3 before leaving

Result: Looked out from main bridge barrier for minutes x4;  
called taxi for pick up

## BILL TWO

After leaving the police station Bill walks uphill for a long time, toward home but in a way that doesn't feel like he is walking home, or that feels more complicated than simply walking home. He thinks there should be music, rain: maybe a shower of rose petals, each emitting a sad melodic note on landing. There is no musical flower rain. His legs are numb, but the pavement cracks hurt his feet. The sky is a very deep, dark and beautiful blue, the early morning sky that looks similar to dusk but cleaner, the air cooler and fresher, a brightening glow instead of a fade. He is breathing heavily and quickly, each muscle craving oxygen, his stomach painfully empty. The tapered waists of the cooling towers ahead look like two fat men breathing in, friendly red blinking lights down their sides. Or no: the little red lights down their sides make them look less like fat men. As does the absence of heads, faces, body parts generally. While Bill isn't precisely sure where he is, the familiar sight still comforts him.

He reaches the top of the road, a summit, sees that everything now goes downhill, the road forking in the distance, one way to a small disused train station and two tower blocks of flats – grey even in the gloom – the other to an old abandoned primary school. He has been going the wrong way. Behind him is a panoramic, like a painting, clusters of buildings thickening and thinning out with no apparent reason, beginning to wake into the day. Amber lights are still burning in rows not quite straight; two cars barely interrupt the stillness, move slowly in opposite directions. Some windows are lit but most are still dark. A single billboard advertises itself. The two cooling towers blink. Facing the wrong way, Bill sees none of this. He thinks of the towers, hopes they might look like two fat men holding their breath to everyone, at least in the few seconds before the absences are noticed.

The sun is yet to rise but the sky has lightened, something happening below the horizon. Bill walks back downhill, his strides requiring more concentration this time, each step more deliberate, a different kind of effort to walking upwards, his calves rather than his thighs tensing. Some of the unfamiliar shapes he passed only minutes ago are now, uncoupled from darkness, buildings he recognises. He takes a left, then a right, easily finds the canal, or at least the vacant dip before a cluster of trees where he knows the still water lies, a straight line home.

He struggles down the dewy bank to a footpath of mud and woodchip. A family of ducks is roused and disperses, quacking sleepily, disappearing into a resting mist on the water. Bill tries to walk softly, not wanting to cause further disturbance. He steps onto the grassy verge to the side of the path and feels immediate dampness spread across each foot. He checks, and understands now the pain he was feeling on the



pavement: the soles of his shoes and socks have worn away, the lines of his feet showing through the hundreds of tiny squares between the latticed cotton threads. The thought of the remaining walk home, buying socks, new shoes, fills Bill wi-

-Bill breathes. A horrible burning in his nostrils, like icicles or even chilli peppers. His head jolts backwards but the rest of his body is heavy and prone, a weight rather than a machine. The pain in his nose melts saltily and drips at the back of his throat. He hears a duck quack, unsure if it is hidden by the mist or roosting somewhere in his brain.

The sun is still yet to rise. Perhaps it won't. Bill opens his eyes and they sting. He closes them, sees a pulsing yellow rectangle suspended in blackness, turning slowly, drifting away. He reopens them and the stinging is worse. Closes them again, feels grass on the nape of his neck, realises he must have turned over, that there is a big brightening sky behind his eyelids. He can hear the peaceful lapping of water. It is reminiscent of something or other. It reminds him of the peaceful lapping of water; also Noah after the flood. He turns again onto his stomach, does a childish press-up using arms as well as legs, elbows and knees. His mouth is slimy with mucus and his hair is dripping wet. He straightens his back and a fat wet blob drips from his fringe, tickles as it follows the groove around his nostril. He moves his hands over his clothing to find something dry, uses the upper sleeve of his coat, first to push hair away from his face then to rub hard at his eyes. He finds these slow movements, one at a time, to be somewhat tedious.

No pain when he opens his eyes this time, just a thick blurring that will not clear. He sees nobody around—the moment is his alone, undocumented. There is nothing to do but carry on to the canal lock.

A three-storey apartment building leans back from the bank like a stumpy guard sleeping on duty. Bill is glad he thinks of the guard as stumpy, otherwise he might be afraid. He tries not to think about it too much. Each of the windows reflects a different patch of sky. He tries to imagine inside but can only picture Emily's lounge.

In one window, instead of sky, a floating baby. Then a sinewy maternal arm wrapped around its waist, holding the child outwards as if to show it something outside. Its fat doughy hand presses whitely on the glass and pulls away, a smudged print follows. Bill looks to his right, in the same direction as the baby but, above the still-shadowed copse on the opposite bank, there are only a few static clouds, both lighter and darker than the sky beyond. He checks to see exactly where the baby's gaze is fixed but sees the mother instead. Her eyes are impossible to make out – her face still

a little obscured by the reflected clouds – but he can tell her expression, like her arm, is maternal, protective, accusing. He walks on, only then realising how he had stopped.

Bill wonders whether the baby was in need of a father, the woman a husband. He thinks of the many examples of good men he has seen on television, how they would offer themselves. It would be easy if he was the young police officer, or even the old detective.

A change underfoot: the path has ended abruptly and merged into the grass verge. He sees the lock in the distance, but without a path it feels incorrect to carry on. There is no indication where else to go. The canal is wider here: three narrowboats are moored up, almost still, the normally vibrant paintwork not yet distinct. From one boat a plume of white smoke is drifting lazily out of a squat, rusty chimney, and Bill can smell wood burning.

A small building is set back from the bank, a sign on the door for a toilet and shower. Bill follows an unevenly depressed line in the grass that has been trodden flat. It is a relief to know he is walking in the footsteps of others. The building has no windows. He tries the door but it is locked. The creak of the timber as he pushes suggests it could easily be forced open, but his desire to get inside immediately vanishes. He presses his fingertips against the pebbledash wall and pushes himself away.

When he reaches the lock he climbs onto the top gate. The water on the other side is much lower, and he is surprised by the depth of the drop. He spreads his arms out for balance and carefully steps forward. He tries to imagine a famous tightrope walker but cannot get the image of a clown out of his mind. He thinks about the term *mind's eye* and who might be in control of his.

When he reaches the middle he sees a gap. He is not on the actual gate, but a long kind of lever a foot above it. The gate itself is made of greenish, rotting wood that looks unsafe. He steps over the gap and continues to the other bank, no longer thinking of tightrope walking or the mind's eye.

There is movement inside the closest narrowboat, only a few metres from the ground paddles. Its long, colourful tiller wavers like a compass needle. Bill considers waiting until someone stepped out onto the stern so he can ask for a towel or a glass of water, but he hears a toilet flush and then the few footsteps of someone going back to bed, dropping down heavily enough to rock the boat. He listens for another noise, a groan, a moan: nothing, just the residue of sound dissipating into a larger silence.

In the thicket of green and brown trees set back from the bank Bill sees a dark opening, the entrance to another path trodden into the ground – another assurance – lined with spindly rotting mushrooms. He follows the depression, glad the sleeping

insects are still waiting for the air to warm, too early to organise themselves into little clouds.

The thicket is shallower than it seemed from the canal bank. Soon the footed path turns into a kind of snicket or ginnel or alleyway: a narrow stretch of concrete between two high walls. Who chose where the greens and browns end, where the concrete begins, he has no idea. There are obstacles: overturned bins and bulging or disembowelled black plastic bags. Several bins have instructions on them, like “assistance needed” and “no glass,” while others have numbers painted in black or white on their sides. Everything seems both recently visited and long abandoned. Bill walks on, hopes to avoid anything sharp on the ground.

The snicket or ginnel or alleyway leads into a cul-de-sac he has passed by many times, perhaps even played in as a boy—he feels warmth in his stomach as he recognises the shapes and colours of the buildings. Small houses are attached in twos, ten couples positioned in an almost crescent, each with a paved front driveway divided by thin and flimsy brown wooden fences sprouting at angles, some parts pulled away from the metal wire used to secure it together. There is a tiny roundabout of raised tarmac in the middle of the not quite crescent that reminds Bill of an inverted amphitheatre. Three bicycles are strewn in the middle. He wonders would anyone follow in pursuit if he tried to ride away, or even just spin a tyre quickly so the spokes become a pleasing blur. Instead he walks on, surprised and slightly nauseated by the fragrant smell of nectarines coming from one of the territorial privets.

At the exit or entrance or mouth of the cul-de-sac he sees the roofs of his own block of houses, the alley that leads home opposite an old building standing alone, windows boarded up, a sign above the door: *The oblin*, part of the missing letter still on the pavement below. The warmth inside cools, his anticipated relief does not come. He thinks about the word *home* but it only brings the image of his front door, nothing beyond. All he has to do is continue another hundred or so metres—then he can dry himself, warm himself and sleep. He turns, instead, in the opposite direction. A block away, amid the dawn, the local minimarket glows open in neon and halogen. Bill walks toward it.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS (every one of my books is co-written with the big JC)

“Whatever else your book may be, it is also an intimate tour guide. Bring alive not just the street names and monuments, but the messy inches of graffiti on old shop walls, or the barber brushing dead hair out of his doorway and onto the pavement, where it can be carried by the wind towards the poplar tree that spires in the same wind towards the old church where your protagonist was once baptised or, if you want to be edgy, raped.” (*DAWW* (see Chapter 64, ‘Bringing Detail Alive,’ and Chapter 76, ‘Breaking Your Readers’ Hearts’) p3)

### STORYTELLING (not being Bill, not being me)

Do I want to be edgy? Unsure. I do know that I don’t want to be writing stuff like that shitty second paragraph of the last section. I’m annoyed with myself. It’s literary trite. Bob Hawk would be shaking his head, even though I deployed several of his suggestions.

### STORYTELLING (an odd thing, shopping)

An odd thing: I’d planned to bring Bill home. I felt bad for him, wet and cold and dishevelled, and wanted to dry him off and clean him up. But when I got to the end of the cul-de-sac, home in sight, I couldn’t write on. Seems silly to say, but Bill didn’t feel ready. See how that fourth-to-last sentence of mine is almost pleading, the “All he has to do”? It felt like trying to feed a stubborn, closed-mouth toddler, I imagine—anything involving toddlers looks pretty difficult, hence why I kept that one Bill noticed behind the glass even though it offers almost no sense of metaphor. He couldn’t be persuaded home, anyway. I suppose it makes sense for him to pick up some stuff, food or something, although now I have to imagine the inside of a minimarket.

### CANALS (a connection between rivers, a ghost in the details)

Emily once joked – this is in that same museum canteen I mentioned in Glasgow, with the fibreboard table, the kind with slippery moulded plastic seats attached to it by a

crude metal arm, all soldered together and attached to a wall that seems thinner and lighter than your weight on the seat – that she'd never have thought of canals, that, if it was left to her, thousands of cart horses would've died of overwork and she would've died of sadness. I said the same about fire and the wheel, and she smiled in a way that one does when something they've planned to say doesn't get the reaction they expected. No, there's no such smile. She smiled and it was obvious to me that she'd prepared the joke and my comment interrupted her. People like to think of themselves as good actors, that their facial expressions can disguise their emotions. In truth, almost everybody is a terrible actor, their faces betray so much.

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (filling Bill's blanks)

I try flicking through the Checkhardt for inspirational words I can use, but all the interesting ones tend to have something to do with botany. I don't see Bill as a botanist, or, actually I *can* see it, but it seems like a lot of work.

I found the entry "*FLÂNEUR: 19<sup>th</sup> century technique in which a character (normally the PROTAGONIST) is depicted in THIRD-PERSON omniscient narration (q.v.) walking through an urban area and observing detail. Normally a conceit for social commentary or VERISIMILITUDE,*" and I realised I forgot to provide any social commentary. I didn't think about commenting on society, and now that detail about the upturned bins reeks of (Blessed voice) *saying something important* about the area. It had nothing to do with that. I haven't really got any interest in that sort of thing at all.

### MOTHERS AND FATHERS (the generation of broken homes despite significant advances in the science of adhesives)

If Bill seems like the kind of guy who doesn't know how to be a real man there's a good reason. My biological father left home before I was born. Main Uncle – who was the type of man who lives for a time in a caravan and at other times in the homes of relatives of ex-lovers – was the closest to a replacement. Aside from watching American professional wrestling together in the AM weeknight hours there wasn't much of a relationship between us. He wasn't a bad drunk: he got hammered very quickly, consuming almost no alcohol. He was a successfully frugal drunk. He was a violent drunk in a limp-wristed way but, worse, also a thief. If he couldn't steal he would work manual labour jobs until the opportunity came to steal. He didn't die, exactly, but work sort of killed him: unharnessed, he fell from scaffolding and landed on an erect pipe,

impaling him through the anus. Years after my mother told me this I heard another story, that he tried to con a group of workmates who reacted by sodomising him with a broom handle. So at least one of these stories is untrue, or, if not, I imagine he'll have some serious issues. I've no idea. Anyway, as far as it was of relevance to my life, that was the death of Main Uncle. He lived with us for almost five years and then we never saw him again. File this in my defence.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (diagnoses, literally falling apart)

A macular hole. That's what's causing the little black sperm (*q.v.*) to wriggle in my peripheral. Bits of jelly have been falling away from my retina. When I look in the mirror my left pupil is enormous. Attempts to consider this condition in metaphorical terms have been in vain. I'm an ill man, but it's the sort of illness that sums up a life rather than ends it: "Oh, his eye is sperming all over the place? That's so him!"

CONFESSION (things not working out and a kind of bait-and-switch)

I have some frustrations with how this is going so far, but they're of my own doing. I had an idea that Bill's journey could replicate Jesus through the Stations of the Cross (reading Bob Hawk's advice on story plotting ("Break your story into parts, pieces, *moments*: the whole is formed from a number of exciting segments, like six, for example, or eleven" *DAWW*, p3) I realise my first lesson in storytelling was as a child: Father Gilday, Father Drummond's predecessor, walking clockwise around church for the Stations every Easter). I'm not sure why but I've had a constant thought that, at the end of his story, Bill could die then somehow 'rise up' from death. As I said, I'm not sure why. I'm always a little disappointed with endings in films, books etc., so much so that it seems I've even edited my own childhood experience of the Stations: the resurrection after the crucifixion is apparently never included: the final station tends to depict Jesus being laid in the tomb, at least 'officially.' But everything I read on the subject has a brief footnote to say that sometimes, 'unofficially' (what 'officially' and 'unofficially' mean in this context I'm unsure, but the image I have is of rebel hero priests), it *can* be included, which I take to mean my own feelings on the issue may not be... I mean, maybe I'm not alone. Everybody's alone, of course, but other people might agree with me is what I'm saying, that we long for both a death *and* a resurrection as an ending. Probably something to do with never being unaware of death but also never really being ready for it either, always surprised by it, almost offended. So a death and a

resurrection make sense. Or maybe it's that people already know the story and it feels a bit unfinished if it ends with Jesus left in the tomb. But then that's just impatience, as the people attending church for the Stations of the Cross will almost certainly be back two days later to finish the story. So adding a resurrection station actually completely fucks with both continuity and suspense. The Easter mass turns from being a big 'And then he rose from the dead!' celebration, which is basically the crux of the whole thing, to something more like 'so as we mentioned last time, Jesus rose from the dead and...' which sounds like someone reading over the minutes of last month's neighbourhood watch meeting. Not that I've ever been to a neighbourhood watch meeting—the last place I lived my invitation was rescinded, while at my current building 'neighbourhood watch' consists of Jazz standing at his window, slowly nodding.

So the problem with the idea of Bill's story following Jesus in the Stations of the Cross—wait, just a second. The last paragraph implied that I don't take the Stations seriously. I don't, but I know other people do. I should say that the real reason some churches might include a fifteenth station in their mass is because a lot of people get very upset at the ending of Good Friday mass being Jesus's slow death and burial. A lot of people cry. I did myself as a child, although the burning of myrrh – another thing I seem to remember even though it doesn't seem to be common practice – also makes my eyes sting and water. But a lot of people do cry, and it makes sense not to ruin their weekend.

As far as resurrections go, Jesus's is fairly short-lived, of course. Lazarus lasted another thirty years. For those keen on resurrections but not the other Jesusy stuff, there are better stories out there.

But the problem with the idea of Bill's story following that of Jesus in the Stations of the Cross is that I found it too hard. You know the bit where the "other heads" turn to face Bill as he sneezes in Bill One? They were supposed to be the council members at Jesus's trial, condemning him to death. But I couldn't figure out a way to be subtle about that idea, or even just getting that many people into Emily's small lounge. You can imagine. Then I thought about the old detective being Pontius Pilate, which is still a little bit like what's going on when I think about him: to get him to ask Bill about Emily, wrongly accuse him of something, and for Bill not to deny it. Not to confirm it, either, but rather do the whole refusal to state innocence thing that some people consider noble. But you can see where that would lead, and I'm not sure I want a police drama to come out of this. And I suppose Bill fainting at the end could've been Jesus falling with the cross for the first time.

So I've decided against Bill's story following the Stations of the Cross, aside from a few residual things: the old detective being a bit like Pontius Pilate, who I now

need to research; fourteen sections, which I'm aiming for; and some kind of death and resurrection at the end. I don't know if that last bit destroys the story but there's no way of knowing at this stage if it will end like that. Even if it doesn't... if I ever read a book that ends *without* death the only thing I ever think is 'yeah, and then everyone dies.' So it would be disingenuous of me to end any other way. It's weird we don't think more about death, given the odds, and it's not like we exactly distract ourselves with ecstasy and wonder, is it? Who was it that wrote "why aren't they screaming?" about people in an old person's home? I mean, to whoever might be reading this sentence right now, are you spending your time wisely?

### ADVICE FOR PEOPLE GRIEVING/MOURNING A SUICIDE (meaning)

You'll find yourself drawn to the newspaper obituaries, first to see what people could possibly say in the circumstances, then because you start to become moved by their poetry. Not the famous poets but the amateur attempts of the recently bereaved. There are never enjambments, only end-stopped rhymes, and a limited lexicon of thirty or so short nouns into which people decant their sadness. You'll become moved by *way*, *say*, *pray*, and every time someone notices how many things rhyme with *eyes*.

Noticing and feeling these things might make you feel like a good person, but only if you don't think too hard about what makes someone a 'good person'. If you start to think hard about the way you're setting yourself up to be moved in some way you might end up thinking of yourself as a bad person.

### CONFESSION REDUX (more things not working out and another kind of bait-and-switch)

Just on the stuff about unsatisfying endings: I first became aware I held this opinion when reading the Gospel of St Peter in the front room (I initially thought it was some kind of reading room but it turned out to be a televisionless living room) of Father Gilday's presbytery during my unsuccessful application to be an altar boy (my life is made up of unsuccessful applications: altar boy; esteemed Catholic secondary school; red brick university; my first two applications for an IBS 'Can't Wait' card), handed to me as some sort of consolation, I assume, and left me to sit alone for several hours with the warning "this is a version they don't want you to see." I suppose Father Gilday was a rebel hero priest, although at that point in my life "they" could only mean aliens. It was a photocopy printed on A4 paper, big inky black letters spilling into each other inside the ghostly outline of a book, the document hole-punched along one side and secured



with red string and one of those little brass split pins in the corner. I hadn't realised the altar boy interview was over until Gilday walked back in with a glass of wine, wearing only his underpants, and screamed. Anyway, I first became aware of the problem with endings when Peter reckoned Jesus didn't die on the cross and I was like the fuck? I mean, you'd think everyone would remember that bit the same.

REPORT ON TAXI DRIVER REACTION TO MIDNIGHT DROP-OFF (it was late and I probably  
stank of weed, so no hard feelings)

Time: 00:52

State: Tipsy; high

Company: A-Z Taxi

Driver: Rattish Caucasian; 32-60; wiry; beard; some sort of hat;  
garlic; wooden beaded driver seat cover; cleverphone  
suspended by contraption of sorts, flashing regularly; not  
wearing seatbelt

Car: Hard to tell

Conversation: None

Duration: 15 minutes

Fare: £7.90

Reaction: Did not question location; did not look around; took  
very long time to find 10p change; drove immediately away

Result: Looked out from main bridge barrier for many minutes;  
saw the ghostly shimmer of the moon on the water; called AAA  
Taxi for pick up

## BILL THREE

Bill is disappointed when the minimarket's mechanical doors slide open before he has to slow his pace. It is both too easy and too removed. He steps between them and onto a dirty square of carpet, thinks of his almost bare feet.

He did not expect customers but an elderly lady is standing in the aisle ahead. She has an open carton of eggs in her hand, seems to be deliberating, shakes her head. She replaces the carton and picks out another, delicately unclasping the lip of the cardboard lid.

Bill takes a shopping basket from the stack near the door, picks out two curves of brittle onion skin. His hands seem small. He looks around but sees no bin, stuffs the skin into his coat pocket. The old lady is holding an egg up to the light, slowly turning it like a rare jewel or rare egg, and he walks past her as quietly as possible. His arms and hair are still damp from the canal. The air conditioning makes his skin burn cold. The crotch of his trousers is damp, too, and rubs painfully against his groin.

Despite the discomfort, Bill slips easily into the slowness of the aisles. There is very little movement or sound, and the lady, the humming refrigerators, are almost calming. His shadow is barely visible on the linoleum floor, as if the long rectangles of halogen hanging above are firing their beams straight through him; as if he is clear liquid. He reaches the end of the first aisle before remembering he is here to shop, unsure what to buy. Suddenly there seems to be music playing, or just a fluke of different noises combining for a few seconds.

In the second aisle Bill places a carton of long-life milk into his shopping basket, which now seems emptier than before. He adds a box of teabags, dropping them rather than placing, to feel the increase in weight more abruptly. He likes the order in the shop, how there is thought behind the things that people might need or want: the teabags next to the milk, where there is also coffee, sugar, powdered hot chocolate. But there are also tins of tuna close by, and a kind of small brush.

Upon learning Emily liked green tea Bill found some in a bigger supermarket closer to the city centre. Although it tasted better with lots of milk and sugar it still was unenjoyable and made him feel like throwing up. Thinking of it now brings on the same nausea, although he is glad to have tried it.

On the box of teabags is a picture of a smiling yellow sun beaming over a village filled with tiny houses. It is the cheaper of two options. At the other end of the shop a teenage Pakistani girl is at the only checkout. He places the teabags back in the gap they left on the shelf, takes the more expensive brand instead, with a picture of a steaming

cup on a windowsill and a view of a green hill full of flowers. It is wrapped in clear thin plastic that creates a blue shadow over the cup as Bill crimps a section between his thumb and forefinger.

The Pakistani girl looks bored—not in her face, which is too far away for Bill to make out clearly, but in her posture. She does not busy herself pretending to do work but sits slumped, swivelling from side to side in her chair. If she has noticed Bill she has chosen not to disguise her emotions—he wonders if he would be happy or sad if she was surprised to see him. There is normally an older man at the till who slides each barcode over the scanner without judgement, or without seeming to judge. Bill has seen the girl before, slowly sweeping the floor with a long broom, and always made sure not to walk where she had already swept. He feels excited, but not in a good way.

In the last aisle a Pakistani boy is stocking shelves. He is smaller than the girl and has to stretch to place a dented tin of chopped tomatoes onto a shelf that only reaches Bill's chest. His arms are so skinny they appear long. He sees Bill but continues his work, which is practised and thoughtless. He uses two hands to pick up each tin but looks tired like an adult. The thin metal shelves vibrate and quietly thunder with each new item. Although he has unintentionally mixed cans of tomato soup with the chopped tomatoes, Bill feels admiration for the boy.

He walks around a stack of brown boxes and finds the energy drinks, which are always in a different location and never with the other drinks, as if the staff are unsure where they belong. He likes the kind in a black can with a blue rabbit on the front, sprinting on its hind legs and smiling. The rabbit's legs are perfect, blurred like spinning bicycle spokes, suggesting high-speed. Whoever drew them is Bill's favourite artist, although the old man who normally works at the checkout didn't know how to find out the artist's name and said it was unlikely anyone else here might be able to help.

They don't have the energy drink he likes. The remnants of one empty cardboard package remains, torn in half through the rabbit's stomach in a way that seems intentionally aggressive, both to the rabbit and to Bill. The only option is a brand that has a picture of a male face tinted green, with wild hair and whirlpools for eyes. He thinks this image is more accurate to the reality of the drink's effects, which is why he prefers the rabbit.

He is close enough to see how the Pakistani girl's face is distorted by the bright lights, every raised blemish casting its own shadow. He adds a four-pack of energy drinks to his basket, the metal handles dig into his fingers.

The minimarket smells like a hospital. Clumped grey dust, tiny bits of paper, plastic and other detritus line where the shelving units meet the floor, swept away but

not up. Not like a hospital. Perhaps it is a new job the young boy has inherited from his sister. Bill wonders about a tube of toothpaste but does not stop. He thinks of his own skin and hair and clothes and smell and wishes again that the old man was working.

At the counter the Pakistani girl says

- Hello how are you

in a way that does not sound like a question. There are dark smears of brown under each of her eyes that remind Bill of a picture of an old bird from a school book—an illustration of a crow or raven or jackdaw next to a poem about something or other. Her cheeks are covered in violent acne bubbles that she has tried to paint over with make-up—there is a small selection of products for non-white skin near the counter. Some of the spots are a similar colour to her skin but others still glow red. He is surprised to see her bare knees bent over the edge of her swivel chair and tries to concentrate instead, as he takes out each item, on the orange rust that creeps across the metal wires of the shopping basket.

It is probably her nose that makes him think of a bird, thinks Bill as he places the milk, teabags and energy drinks on the conveyor belt. It does not move. The Pakistani girl does not move. She doesn't seem embarrassed of her face, which makes Bill more embarrassed at his own. He slides the teabags with the back of his hand to the metal lip at the end of the belt. He tries to do the same with the energy drinks, but the rubber surface creates too much friction and they fall over. He picks them up with the milk and places them next to the teabags. She scans the items, but instead of letting each slip down the shiny slope of the metal packing area she orders them into a pile close to her seat.

Bill is blushing as he hands over his credit card. He does not know what next. She holds it away from her and stares at him for a few seconds. He wonders if he has done something wrong. She places the card firmly into the slot of the little machine, calls out something in what might be Urdu or Punjabi. The young boy appears from around a corner and packs Bill's three items into a plain white plastic bag, milk and energy drinks first, then the teabags on top, and leaves, saying something back to the girl in Urdu or Punjabi. Bill can tell it is something impolite.

The girl is waiting for him to press his pin number into the machine. How long? He feels himself blush hotter and struggles to remember the four numbers. He waits for a second, looks at the way his finger shakes over the key pad. He doesn't remember it, but he remembers how to remember it: Stevens-Watson-Smith-back to Watson 2-5-6-5. The greenish screen above the keypad reads \*\*\*\*. He breathes out.

It doesn't work. The screen reverts to blankness. He holds his right wrist firmly with his left hand – wishing he did not have to – and presses the numbers again, a small

star appearing for each number. The Pakistani girl sighs and transfers her weight in the seat from left hip to right, lets her head tilt in the same direction as if her body cannot sustain the tedium. He prepares to tell her something about the card being wet when she says

- It's three maximum

then

- It'll be blocked.

Bill waits. Her voice has changed—his difficulty has interrupted her indifference, and she sounds both irritated and concerned, although still bored. Bill feels a new kind of heat, a warmth and dryness and tingling, like somebody has lit a log fire behind him or at least an electric heater. The girl's uneven face begins to smooth out, blur and glow. Her lips part soundlessly and she rises above him and flies off over his left shoulder. Bill waits.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS (everyone assumes I'd naturally have an interest in birds, and I do!)

"When writing about your own life you gotta think of a good metaphor to make the story not just about some stuff everyone goes through. Space is a good metaphor, as are sports. If your story is two lovers quarrelling, boxing might be an excellent metaphor. For one person loving someone who doesn't love them back you want something like a small moon orbiting a giant planet, although a bright star metaphor could also be used, where the star is so bright it causes blindness. Blindness can also be a metaphor, especially for when a character cannot see something important." (*DAWW*, p3)

### STORYTELLING (lost in the aisles, the old lady and the egg)

That was pretty bloody boring. I'm sorry. If it's any consolation, it was as dull to write as to read. I just couldn't figure out a way to get Bill outside again. I think my attitude to this section can be summed up by the old lady with the eggs: a violent yolky mess pooled at the bottom of an egg box is a horrible thing, but I've promised myself that I'll never inspect for cracks like the old lady. How many ways do you have to protect yourself? How much do you have to endure? It'll be less tedious from hereon in, I promise.

### STORYTELLING (racism, tricky situation)

It's only just occurred to me that Bill is white, or at least the Bill I'm imagining. Does he really have to notice the ethnicity of the shop staff? I mean, do I? I have a terrible feeling that any time the race of a character isn't stressed it's implied they are white, and my implication is a deeply ignorant one (albeit absolutely true). And in noting this am I just attempting to justify my own racism (and in noting *this* am I not making an assumption that I've done enough to protect myself)? But isn't it also an honest statement? If Bill, or I, make the distinction in our minds but pretend we don't, or that it's irrelevant, isn't there something unhelpfully dishonest going on, or even sinister?

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (feeling, bad form?)

I find it difficult to write how Bill feels. Every time I try he becomes less Bill and more me, like the bit about Emily and green tea—that was totally inappropriate of me to force my memory onto him. And see what happened when I did it? He just stood there staring at a box of fucking teabags!

But he's beginning to surprise me: as I turned him into the third aisle with the young stock boy I didn't expect Bill's admiration. I'm not sure where that came from. And his preference for a certain energy drink I have no idea about whatsoever. Have you noticed the way some parents lose their shit when their children develop agency? I promise I won't do that to my Bill.

### STORYTELLING (disingenuous greetings, philosophy)

The girl at the checkout saying "hello, how are you" was certainly intentional on my part. I don't think we spend enough time or effort on our greetings. I think Schopenhauer has a good take on this: online wrestling forums aren't exclusively male but certainly women don't have an easy time on them, and the misogyny on wrestlenow.net is how I first heard of Schopenhauer, who seems a pretty handy point of reference if a guy wants to dismiss a woman's opinion on anything related to the squared circle. I've never deployed Schopenhauer for that but I like his suggestion for greeting others, not as Mr. or Mrs. or whatever, but "My fellow sufferer". To me, this is a kind of revelation. Maybe it's too simple, or I'm missing something important. Not that it's a depressing term but that perhaps there's a retort to this idea, which I think would immediately make the world a better place. Imagine if everyone addressed one another in acknowledgement of life's difficulties, its finitude! It seems so obviously wise that I'm certain I've failed to consider some glaring flaw.

Addendum: Also when people meet for the first time they should spend the first few minutes showing and explaining their scars. Post-adolescence nobody goes unscathed. We should embrace this fragility and robustness. I think this is an original thought.

### STORYTELLING (cluck, cluck)

It pains me to leave the old lady there checking the eggs, give her life just a few sentences. I feel compelled to go back, give her more. She *did* exist – maybe still does –

and to leave her as a sketch seems wrong. But to do her justice would be to leave Bill, to write instead about the lonely old woman checking eggs, reaching up to the shelf so the cuff of her ill-fitting rain coat slips down her arm and uncovers wrists of the thinnest skin and morbid purpled veins, her permed hair sprayed secure in the unnatural fashion some women eventually decide on; the powdery makeup collecting, not without dignity, in the deep crevices of her cheeks; the sweet smell of lavender as you walk past her. The clunky shoes and the deformities they imply inside. The inevitable cancerous cells spreading out from whatever epicentre, so greedy for life they can't see they're on a suicide mission. But who am I to decide that's all she is? (Allen? Blessed?)

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (affluence pheromones, unready for Eros)

And what about the Pakistani girl looking like an old bird? Was that Bill's or mine? I think it was a bit of both. It's a pretty dull observation, the kind you'd expect a dull person to make. Or a half-person. Was there something sexual about Bill's choice to buy more expensive teabags after seeing the girl at the checkout? When I wrote "He feels excited, but not in a good way" I think I was trying to reclaim some control over Bill. There are things I need him to do that must be set up. But when they're in place they seem wrong, somehow, while other details, those that come from no forethought – almost like they come directly from Bill – seem right. I'll try to provide some clarity:

My Details	Bill's Details
As above, Bill noticing the old lady checking the eggs for damage.	As above, reference to two energy drinks – I have no information to suggest either exist – and the preference for one over the other.
The stated fondness for an anticipatory order to the items in the shop (ruminating on this, I actually find it much more sinister).	The Pakistani girl's legs. Or, more specifically, the surprise at seeing her knees and the embarrassment it seems to instigate.
The smell of the mini-market (like a hospital) and the dirt swept to the sides of the aisles.	The mini-market in fact <i>not</i> being a hospital.
The difficulty to push the items along the rubbery surface of the conveyor belt.	As above, Bill switching teabags. It was tedious enough to write about the first box but it seemed impossible for me not to write about the second as well.
The method of remembering the credit card pin number.	The attempt to steady one hand with the other whilst entering the pin number.



That was more difficult than I expected. There are several examples of one of us playing off each other, like with Bill correcting me that it was not a hospital, or how I elaborated on the energy drinks by having the packaging torn and empty. This complicates things, but, at least from my perspective, it's the moments of artifice that stick out, while the moments that I can only credit to Bill seem more real, more genuine. And then there are moments that are both his and mine: the empathy shown to the girl's acned face isn't solely mine and is something that felt partly Bill's when I wrote it. That seems ridiculous but it's true, and I think the way he refuses to ruminate on the thought for long, immediately picking up the drinks and moving on, might indicate something or other. I need a little time away from Bill.

### MOTHERS AND FATHERS (novelistic, unnovelistic)

Remember this entry from about ten pages ago? You probably forgot. *I* forgot. But I've thought of an excellent little conceit that I'm excited about, and this is where I have to put up some scaffolding so later bits don't seem to float on nothing. 'Excellent' is a little much: it's actually quite simple, just introducing a few details of a character that seem incidental before telling a story that lends them more importance. The reason I'm excited about it is that it occurred to me naturally, almost like I'm a real novelist. I know it probably seems like I'm pissing around here but I hope you'll give me a chance. I promise that despite appearances I'm trying to find a way to make my experiences interesting. I'm doing my best. And I know that this stinks of conceit, too, and that the acknowledgement does, and this. And on, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*. Whatever self-conscious and self-reflective gesture I make has been done and done and done and there's no chance I can top it. But the truth is I'm not trying to top it. It's an unfortunate irony that sincerity can be easily missed if it's subtle but, if over-asserted, comes across as deeply insincere. Since beginning this thing I've developed immense respect for anyone with the bravery and faith to write without worrying about convention, to actually tell a story without the anxiety that it might have been told before or that someone might have told it better. But I've begun now, and I just want to be as honest as I can about my difficulties, what I'm trying to achieve. And this is one important bit, because later I'll explain how my mother's death (when I was thirteen) is related to my present understanding of Bill, who has haunted me incessantly ever since, forced every moment of my life into feeling like a staged existence, a kind of irreality I observe yet can't touch. But the important bit is that, although I could just jump straight into that explanation, I want to share something about my mum because even though she was never a very good presence in my life I still hate the idea of her meaning absolutely

nothing to anyone who's persevered this far. I want you to care, and I don't want to seem like I'm trying to trick you into caring.

### MOTHERS AND FATHERS (someone to blame)

Knowing my mother – and I think this is true of any child attempting to understand a parent beyond the role they played or failed to play – is a retrospective effort, a piecemeal assemblage, an exercise of the imagination. Bob Hawk says that sometimes 'evocations' are just as good as stories with a beginning, middle and end ("Evocations are sometimes just as good as stories with a beginning, middle and end," Bob Hawk, *DAWW*, p1). The first thing I did was look up EVOCATION, which was unhelpful: some people think it means calling forth spirits, which was initially very exciting until the Checkhardt suggested this was confused with INVOCATION. I think Bob Hawk just means memories, of which I have a few.

I'm thinking specifically of a box of her surviving belongings: two basic and gendered girlish dolls, faded pink ribbons, a small pile of letters from a family in Oklahoma (mum called them her real family with heavy emphasis on *real*) who wrote and sent gift packages for a while in the late 50s then stopped, and a pair of rusted ice skates, inside one mouldy leather boot a Polaroid of mum as a young girl. I sifted through the box once several years ago, after a Probate researcher had written to inform me of my aunt's death, and that I was the only relative left. When I was very young she used to run on tiptoes across the living room practicing her waltz jump, and I remember her once telling me the happiest times of her life were spent at a skating rink close to where she grew up. Some biographical stories tend to become kinds of anchors for how you understand a person, I think—or how you place them in your thoughts. This was one anchor for my mother, anyway. There are few others, like her wanting to become a hairdresser and her own mother being unable to afford the premium for the training course, but I find the skating story more memorable, more evocative I suppose. The rink opened when she was eleven and closed on her thirteenth birthday. I was never sure if she had a birthday party there on the last day, or whether that's something I misremember her telling me.

The Polaroid is of her at twelve, on the ice, a tiny frilled skirt and tight vest, her right foot blading the ice, supporting leg almost perfectly straight, her chest parallel with the icy surface, one hand extending out, stretching beyond her to something ahead, the other, her left, groping for her left foot, which was lifted up behind her, her leg like a hook, the fingers and the boot-tip almost another whole foot away from each other.

What the picture tells me is what the picture doesn't tell: that there's no way of knowing if my mother ever reached her foot, grasped it in her hand or even brushed it with her fingers. History only records that she tried, and imagination has to fill in the rest. The photograph suspends her in a moment of effort, likely instinctive and impossible for her to remember distinctly from the seconds before and after, hoping, her neck straight and chin raised, on her face the identical concentrated, collapsing poise she'd later display when attempting to walk across the living room to the drinks cabinet and back.

### IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (a window in your heart)

Facts: repeatedly listening to "Tomorrow is a Long Time" by Bob Dylan, weeping slightly; repeatedly listening to "Graceland" from the album *Graceland*, weeping slightly for a different reason; heavily drinking but finding myself increasingly less charming (actually disliking myself?); repeatedly asking dog "who's a clever bean?" – she doesn't know; searching online for school friends long forgotten—no success; realising (somewhat late in life?) I'm equally excited by gay porn as by straight, although not really thinking I'm in any way gay; incessantly writing material (despite my ignominy); some consistent things – still unable to care about whatever war is on TV; imagining myself as a professional wrestler in the US, 237lbs, 6'2" and a kind of loose cannon: a high-flying babyface who became disillusioned with the monotonous orchestration of American matches with the focus on turgid sted-heads, spending time in the dangerous Mexican and Japanese organisations and developing a mix of high-impact extreme style with a traditional catch-as-catch-can base, before bringing it back to the States and being considered a true revolutionary of the form, a cult star first, gaining a following in the community halls of small towns, before finally signing with a major organisation after being courted for several years, getting huge heat but always refusing a title run, until one day finally becoming undisputed champion and making it obvious that sort of shit didn't concern me; lots of baths.

### CONFESSION (for I have sinned)

I've been thinking about hurting Bill. I wonder what happens when you cause your own creation pain—whether you feel it yourself or are somehow removed. Is it satisfying, the power? But I can't. Every time I begin – I've had a very specific idea of Bill being attacked by two masked men on his way home, which could be something to return to

later (the identities of the attackers, or the motives) and also leave Bill with the scars and bruises that will be noticed by the Old Detective, who I'm hoping to reintroduce soon – something seems to protect him. I won't feign ignorance as to why: I've only ever experienced one moment of real violence and it thus becomes the one my mind foists upon him every time I try.

I'm fourteen and walking home late one Saturday night from a friend's house. It's maybe 11pm. The compulsion for present tense is strong – I know I'll need to redress this at some point. The road I'm walking on is long, wide and, by day, often busy—a dual carriageway that knitted the city centre to the small overspill towns that began popping up after WWII, initially for those people whose houses had been obliterated. Mum was always obscurely proud we never lived in one of those outer-city estates and I think I emulated that pride at the time, less than a year after her death.

Now the road is empty but for a group of boys around my age on the opposite side, gathered around the shop front of what I think was a tanning salon. I think that possibly because I recall rumours that the tanning places were all owned by small time gangsters, so it might not be an accurate memory. What is accurate is the sound of a beer bottle smashing at the kerb near my feet and the laughter of the boys. The smash sounded exactly as it should've, which is often not the case with one's first encounters with certain noises, I've found. The bottle had a clear plastic or cellophane wrapping that, while the shaft had shattered into hundreds of sparkling shards, kept the base intact. *Keeps* the base of the bottle intact, for now it's worth returning to present tense. The boys – still laughing – turn back into an agitated semi-circle facing away from me. I can walk on, only a few metres from home. Thoughts abridged and isolated like this—I can be a victim or choose not. I decide unwittingly, because it's not until the base of the bottle is in my hand and I'm walking across the road that I begin to ask myself what I am doing. I don't know if people ever ask themselves "What am I doing here?" I'd guess we're not often so formally melodramatic. It's useful shorthand, though, as the reality, a sort of skimmed imagining of what is about to happen and an admixture of disbelief, reluctance and I-can't-turn-back-now-ness, is more difficult or at least laborious to depict. I keep slipping from the present. One of the boys, cap peak driving out from his eyebrows, sneering mouth lit by streetlamp, is walking toward me as I walk toward him. I'm holding the base of the bottle so the sharp ends stick outwards. His body is coiled, charged or something and, despite being unarmed, despite him registering the shard in my hand, he approaches with his arms spread wide, daring me to strike first, as if his confidence was a kind of shield. His style was effective— it seemed futile to even bother attacking him, and my arms weakened and felt limp.

We reach the grassy verge between each carriageway (it's just struck me how quaint a term *carriageway* is) at almost the same time. While I'm familiar with the road, the placement of the crossings and traffic lights, the sodium lamps that have long burned out to leave a little gap of anonymizing black in the nightly haze of amber, and, importantly, the little concrete lip that rises before the verge, he's not. His gait is broken and he looks down at whatever awkward way his foot lands. Next thing the glass is in his throat.

I want to say there was no blood, or an explosion of blood. Neither's true. There was, I'm certain, the briefest moment when the side of his neck just to the left of his windpipe opened up into a dark and empty hole, but what followed was a calm and generous bulb of red that efficiently replenished the cavity before falling down the boy's jumper and, a few seconds later, through his fingers. That's all I can report, as my next memory is running from his four friends as they rushed from the neon triangle of the tanning salon awning that seemed (or perhaps not) to arrow directly at me. I was far too close to home to merely run to the door. I lived at this time, I should've mentioned, in a crimped two-bed terrace on the brim of the main road. Instead, I sprinted as fast as I could down a side street and turned into a skinny alleyway that separated the back yards of two lines of terraces.

Double-backing through the network of alleyways was my plan, which, on reflection, seems like an impressively instinctive manoeuvre I'm not really known for. I needed enough distance to turn once and then turn again without being seen, to throw them off. It was difficult at first, as the gaps between each alleyway were too far apart for me to lose them (about 12-15 houses between each one, and maybe five or six alleys in a street—I realise my description of the area might be confusing but it was to me, too, and I've never really been able to make sense of the patterns of those Victorian town planners). Then, disorientated by my double-backing –which had become unintentionally random – I was surprised to find myself at the rear entrance of my block of houses. I jumped onto a set of bins and then over the fence into the yard of the end terrace. I knew the boys saw me do this, but I also knew the next yard was separated by thorny rose hedges, sparse in winter. I scratched through them and then heavily, wobbly, scaled the fence into the next yard, which was my own.

Mine was a relatively short block: ten little homes in all, between a narrow, near identical street and a dilapidated old school. Each one of the houses had a few sad slabs of pavement and an even sadder square of green outside, plus one or two old outhouses that were usually left to fall down, their roofs puffing asbestos spores into the air and into the lungs of the neighbours any time they were touched. The end terrace garden had once been an ad hoc cemetery for the city's small Jewish community in the 1800s—

one of the few school class trips I recall in any detail was being taken to my own house to learn this, the council retrospectively proud of its relative lack of anti-Semitism, making it clear the majority of Jews only left after the city went belly up.

The two outhouses in my yard were rarely used. One still had a terrible old toilet that survived the Blitz. In the other was a variety of orphaned tools, owner unknown. I pulled open the heavy wooden door of the old toilet, two fingers in the hole where some kind of lock must've originally been, and then used it as a spyhole from inside. It hurt trying to breathe slowly and quietly as the muscles in my stomach screamed for oxygen, or at least they seemed to be screaming, quietly. This was the moment I knew I had to cede agency, simply wait to see if I'd be found.

On that last point, I don't recall many moments in my life where a shift in emotion has been so abrupt. My act of violence and my fleeing were part of the same feeling: it was one action – the refusal of victimhood – in two parts, action and reaction. But the waiting in the outhouse felt like an experiment that had to be tested outside the vacuum. The thrust of the glass, the mazy alleyways, the unlocked outhouses; all of this was in some way calculable when I picked up the base of the beer bottle. It was as if sheer will would be enough to get me home. But waiting to see if I was found wasn't part of those calculations. Now everything depended on whether the boys thought to pull open the outhouse doors.

I could say I sat peeking from the old toilet for a long time, or try to emphasise the excruciatingly slow breathing I'd committed myself to in order to stay silent, developing the tension like a real storyteller. But I think it's clear that I'm not that adroit a writer and, anyway, I was in the outhouse for about a minute before the four boys each stormed past me and over the fence into the next yard. I dared to laugh as each one of them slipped at the top of the fence and thudded with grunts on the other side. I was even able to watch, as I climbed the drainpipe and jimmied open my bedroom window, as they each fell in the same way two fences down, far too fixed in their chase-scene mentality to consider anything other than a hare in the distance.

When I switched on my bedside lamp I saw my hands were completely red, a pulsing gash in my palm where I'd evidently held the shard incorrectly. In the mirror on my wardrobe I saw my cheeks and forehead were covered with the tiny wavy red lines of fingerprints—although I don't remember touching my face it seems I had many times. It was only at dusk the following day that I thought to wipe my handprints from the drainpipe.

Each of the boys, it transpired, went to my school. None of them recognised me. They were all a year younger, although the boy I killed had recently been promoted to my year's football team. There were emotional speeches by the head of P.E and the

deputy headmaster, and a few months later the annual prize for excellence in achievement was named after him. It was awarded to me the following year for an essay I wrote on Aquinas. At the prize giving ceremony (a certificate and a book containing photographs of tigers) his older brother sang a duet of “Danny Boy” with a girl who went on to audition unsuccessfully for a well-known pop group.

When I think about an act of violence my mind naturally comes here. No: the memory, the remembering, is more violent: it thrusts itself into my thoughts without permission, pulls me into this old story, locks me in the outhouse and makes me wait, struggling to breathe. A ghost is something that refuses to accept it is no longer in the present. A ghost is an insistent memory.

I can't put Bill into this story, even though he seems to be pushing himself into it at times, wanting to take my part, or the part of one of the chasing boys.

#### THE DRAMA OF FAINTING (sentimental journey)

Of course, just because a fainting is brief on the outside doesn't mean it is brief on the inside.

## BILL FOUR

They first saw Bill at noon in a farmyard chasing a chicken. He was a blurred silhouette before the burning bright sky, closer he looked like a crazed piglet who had mistaken the chicken for a teat, which seemed unlikely but was as good as they could think. Before they could aim a rifle Bill had caught the thing and ripped it open.

Young Officer ran ahead instead of firing but when he reached the yard he dropped abruptly to the floor. Closer, they saw that Bill had lashed his legs with a bat pulled from nowhere. They laughed. Young Officer took out his knife but Old Detective pressed him down with the sole of his boot before he could use it. There was more laughter when they saw the tip of the bat covered in barbs and shreds of Young Officer's trousers and skin. He rolled in the dust, brushing his legs with his palms, his large ear throbbing purple as was its wont in times of danger.

Bill had dried blood on his cheeks. Old Detective asked if he had a sister or mother, and he pointed with a dirty stubby finger to a barn across the yard. Female Officer, Skinny Pakistani Boy and Jess all went inside. Jess came out a few minutes later with a farmer, Bill's father, smacking his backside and telling him to walk pretty, which in fact caused him to walk girlishly and the opposite of pretty. A short piece of scaffolding pole appeared to jut from the seat of his trousers. The rest stayed inside a while longer.

The father spat in Bill's face and called him a something or other. The father's face seemed to be pixelated. Jess pressed her rifle into the crook of the father's knee so he genuflected before Old Detective. They both looked over to the barn. Old Detective took Bill's bat and peeled back the barbs so one long rusty nail was left, hammered through the tip and sticking out two inches. He swung it to the centre of the farmer's forehead, and he remained knelt until it was twisted back out. Old Detective passed the bat back to Bill, who put it down his trouser leg. One or two wordless minutes passed while the barn subdued different sounds. Bill mostly was just itching around his little man area and Young Detective kept on rubbing his legs and sort of crying. When Female Officer and Skinny Pakistani Boy came out they were laughing. They'd both been scratched and bitten on the face but seemed in high spirits.

Jess and Female Officer hoisted Young Officer up by the arms. Old Detective shot him through the eye. They weren't expecting it and kept holding him. Never carry the wounded, they forgot. And never discuss the dead.

Never discuss death because they were walking towards it, or something or other.



Jess's hands were so dry from the dust winds she couldn't stop licking them, which moistened the cracks in her fingers into weeping wounds. Skinny Pakistani Boy's cheeks had collapsed, and the little he managed to eat was quickly thrown back up. Why he covered up his vomit with sawdust was as mysterious as where he sourced his sawdust stock, but he diligently sprinkled it over each little puddle he made in the sand. They smelled the rot of Female Officer's feet. She tried to hide it with her breath and was often successful, even though they each knew to keep their mouths closed and to breathe through their noses.

Their only comfort came when the sun was halved by the horizon, when it bled across the sky and the air was breathable. But that feeling was pinched by the coldness that followed: by dusk, their clothes were sodden from the day's heat. The air then cooled dramatically, and their shirts, jackets and trousers would stiffen and harden and begin to glisten. They were immobile and very cold, stiffness crept into their bones. They would stop, undress, and hold tightly to each other under blankets. Making a fire was never an option because... because there is no fucking wood in this desert. And their blankets were thin and scratchy, resulting in sores on the skin that soon could be considered wounds. Old Detective carried a large piece of canvass that he pitched into a tent each night. He started to take Bill in there with him. The night mutterings were the only time voices were heard.

At dawn clothes cracked and softened. When frost melted to damp they dressed and moved on. The heat would soon dry them before the cycle repeated itself.

None had washed for months. They each had their own distinct odour. By day, when the sands were too bright to look at, smell was an important sense. Even the smell of distant wild dogs was detectable. The dogs were angry and skinny and vicious but also simple and honest and almost noble. They saw themselves like the dogs, kindred. They yearned to be animals, whose only thought was what next. But none thought only what next. They thought *what after* and *what after that*? They were not animals.

For hours the horizon had offered nothing, but suddenly they saw smoke rising, later a chimney. Finally, a single shack of rotten cedar and adobe stood on very short stilts at the foot of a mountain, barbed with mean fencing. Old Detective wouldn't let Bill go alone. Instead, they burst through the door together. The flume was explained by six salted whitefish being smoked in the middle of the room. In the corner was an old woman with an unintelligent smile and clamshells scattered around her bare feet. She opened her palms towards the fish. Her skin was hatching at the corners of her mouth and eyes, the veins in her wrists seemed to be falling away.

Underneath the gapped floorboards there was certainly someone or something, but the old woman looked at them like salvation and they knew nothing here posed a threat.

Jess walked to the fish and pulled them from the line. On the floor a painting of Jesus exposing his heart in his chest leaned against the back wall. Old Detective wiped his finger down the bearded yet feminine face, dried flakes coming too easily away. The rest stood in a circle around the little stove fire as Jess and Female Detective split each fish and passed them around. They were tacky and stiff. Bill gorged on his, finishing it first. Old Detective picked a small amount of dark muscle from the backbone and handed the rest to Bill.

They left at dusk to look for the water. Sunlight was still leaking between the planks of the house, but the air would only be warm enough for a few hours' walking. They worried that they might not find another place to shelter, but after only a few minutes a salty breeze filled their mouths and nostrils. They realised it was not a lake or river they were close to.

They walked. Less than a day away they could see the town and the sea beyond, both aflame, burning so brightly it stained the sky above. Noises were carried by the wind, a thumping bass and smatterings of cheer, the sound of victory or sanctity or insanity, the entire town was celebrating. They knew they were too few in number, too sickly and weary to do anything other than wait for first light. They sat back to back, determined to stay awake until the noise calmed to silence and the sun lit the sky again. Old Detective allowed Bill to sleep, and he twisted and fidgeted under the starlight.

They made their approach as dawn began to glow. In light the town was much closer, and the massive sky behind it dropped into the sea. A road formed out of nothing but they kept to its side.

In the town, streets were covered with wilted flowers, red and yellow petals crushed into the ground. Large canvas banners were strung high between opposite balconies. The silence was like a mountain, or something even quieter. Bill walked ahead, Old Detective looking on. Female Officer watched the windows. They stared back blackly. Nothing moved. The single road was pocked with bullet holes and curled around a cemetery and several war monuments. This town seemed proud of their wars. Jess kept her rifle in both hands. Nothing stirred.

They went through the town square and past a few shuttered buildings, passed a round, squat red lookout tower made of clay, before reaching a long flight of steps carved from or into the earth on which the town was built. At the bottom they saw the sea, fringed by dark sand and perfectly smooth pebbles.

The swash was soft and shallow and very quiet, none of them could remember the last time they had seen something so white. A gull danced along the froth until its leg caught in a thick mess of seaweed. Bill pounced, grabbing its head with both hands. The bird flailed wildly until he curled his arm around its wings. As he opened his mouth to bite it Jess shot a bullet into his neck. The gull flew free, over their heads and toward the town. Bill twitched on the sand and the sea crept to kiss his lips. Old Detective sat down cross-legged and began to cry.

The shot woke the town. Figures moved out of doorways and back in. People pointed. A group quickly clustered and then dispersed in different directions, surrounding them. Jess, Female Officer, Skinny Pakistani Boy and Old Detective formed a semi-circle, cocked their guns like they knew it was over but also like they were fully intending to take a few with them.

Bill crawls to the sea, takes a big gulp of air and goes under. The water isn't exactly wet, but certainly thick. It numbs his body. The salt burns his eyes and nostrils in a familiar way, fills his ears. He drops to the bottom of the seabed, which is smooth and cold and shiny. The sea lights up brightly, an explosion in the town? A luminous mermaid spirals towards him. Her face is Emily's. She rises above him and looks down, but she darkens and blurs. Bill reaches up and loses his sight. There is nothing but darkness. He opens his eyes. The Pakistani girl has his shopping bag in one hand, his credit card in the other. The old lady is behind him holding a box of eggs. They both say

- are you okay

in a way that doesn't sound like a real question.

## Notes on the Text

BOB HAWK SAYS (the jackdaw is an unpleasant bird – there are cases of them poisoning peoples' milk! This is the main reason I do not consume dairy)

“Teach your reader to expect the unexpected. Then surprise them.” *DAWW*, p2

### STORYTELLING (the unreliable narrator, a big letdown)

I don't know what all that was about. It was me doing the killing, I admit, but that was only to find my way to the end. The stage itself I have no idea about: desert, outback? Historic or post-apocalyptic? However it came, the location, the journey, the apparent war (?), none of it was my doing. But it kept coming. Mass execution was the only way to get back to Bill, although he ran into the sea before I was able to complete the massacre. Keeping him still is becoming an irritating task.

### STORYTELLING (the surprising turn of events)

I'll level with you: I'd forgotten all about the young officer and the female officer. I didn't really plan for them to come back into the story, and now I'm not sure what to do. I suppose I could just leave them, like the old lady with the eggs, although I'm a little concerned that all these discarded bodies will pile up. “Never carry the dead” sounds like good advice to me.

### STORYTELLING (surprise and fear makes one quit one's slumber)

I mean, in truth, much of this was written in one go without any editing. Not that I didn't try! Just that it came to me quickly or, no, not quickly, the point is that it *came* to me, rather than my having to search for it. It seems like a lot of the details could be metaphoric, like the old lady in the house (yes, you should imagine the same face as the old egg lady from Bill 3, 'hatching' skin and all), the presence beneath the floorboards, the fish, the depiction of Jesus, etc., and that's just inside the house! The battle-scarred town I won't even begin to attempt decoding. The reason I've persevered with it is due to Bill: he feels further away each time I visit him. I'm not sure why.

THE OLD DETECTIVE (himself a mystery)

I was wondering when he'd return. I'm starting to think Bill might have father issues to work out. And what to do? Not only is it increasingly difficult to figure out Bill, the old detective is nothing like I'd planned. There's nothing for example *wry* about him at all. He actually seems in a bad way, in terms of emotionally speaking. Note: make old detective *wryer*.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (old phrases, remembering empathy)

It's perhaps not quite a pompadour that Father Drummond has. In fact, the only thing I know for sure about the word 'pompadour' is that it's not the right one. His hair peaks at a sharp tip and is coiffed the same every time I've seen it. His teeth are small and clean like pearls.

In one of his homilies Father Drummond discussed Job's comforters: not the idiom, but the actual comforters in The Book of Job. He said we should redefine the understanding by considering the contemporary image it implies, of a man in a suit telling 'the public' (a term necessary because 'people' is apparently too vague) not to worry about the financial crisis or the housing crisis or the employment crisis, as a misuse of the term. It was impressive to see someone take this sort of thing seriously. He said the problem came in two parts, both rooted in forgetfulness: one, that the phrase no longer remembers why Job might want or need comfort (he loses everything and gains a shitload of painful boils); second, that the comforters are not as sinister as one might infer from common usage (they were friends of his). Simply, Father Drummond made the distinction between sympathy and empathy—that the former was natural, external and easy to portray, and the latter much harder and required attention. As I said: impressive to hear even if it sounds quite simple. There was no mention of God being an utter bulb or Job being like "*seriously?*"

THE PRESENT MOMENT (a report from the future, though still the past,  
consideration of externals, concern over the development of Jazz)

Right, okay, here's the situation: obviously I can't be with you, reader, in the present moment: If you're going through this thing now must logically have already been written, probably months or even years ago. My present moment is always historical to you. But – and I'm aware this is a slight spoiler – I've been going through the story, making edits, and I thought it might be nice to pop in and give a few updates every now and then. So, to be clear: same author here as always, but one closer to your present moment right now than the one writing the rest of the text. I've just finished that bit above about Bill in some sort of Wild West situation (what was I thinking!? See appendix 1 for further discussion, although, sadly, not as much as I'd like) and it occurred to me I could let you know that, as grim as it seems to be heading, mostly everything works out sort of okay. For example, I finished the story! I never thought I would, but here I am lying in my shitty little flat thinking life isn't so bad right now. The sun's shining outside, which might have something to do with it. Actually, I worry about some of the inconsistencies that must exist if my mood can so easily be determined by externalities you can't possibly know, so I'll make a point of coming and going whenever there's something worth mentioning. I hope you're having a nice time with the story so far.

I can't see them from my position, on the floor, but I can imagine the elderly couple in the tenement across from me, trudging through their kitchen, boiling water for tea on the Aga that dominates the room. I've watched them with great interest over the last year. Once I'm back on my feet again I'm certain I'll continue. I can hear Jazz making noises downstairs, which means it's not the right time to bother him. I probably shouldn't ever bother him again.

Anyway, I should mention that, although there's a grim bit ahead, you needn't worry.

MOTHERS AND FATHERS (assorted combustions)

My mother burned to death in a house fire whilst asleep in her armchair. It was some time in the early afternoon. I was at school. There are two things I'll say about it and the first is that her death was caused by spontaneous human combustion (SHC). I've spent the best part of a quarter-century alone with this knowledge and I'm now comfortable enough to say fuck you if you don't believe me. I don't mean this aggressively. But yeah, go fuck yourself if you think I'm deluded.

I don't have what would generally be considered 'proof,' but rather a compelling explanation in the absence of any conflicting evidence. The police insisted it

was merely another drunkard drifting off with a lit cigarette between her lips or fingers, even though my mother never smoked in her life. Their verdict came about without any evidence of said cigarette. "Oh, it must have just been incinerated" (I won't go into too much detail about the several years of post-death aftermath, the strange, new grasses that grew after my earth had been razed, so to speak: my conversations with a coroner, forensic analyst and the local police as I campaigned for an inquest. Although I recall the events very well my motivations feel distant to me now. My most eloquent moment in that period occurred at a meeting in the office of a deputy chief constable, where I stood on my chair, tore open my buttoned shirt and shouted "Sir, you have sliced open my heart with your Occam's Razor." A mixed metaphor, granted, but a strong one I think. The fact it was scripted meant it didn't come across quite right, a little unnatural, plus I fumbled the line at *Occam*). A circle of flames, just over a metre in diameter, consumed the sitting chair and my mother in it. No other potential ignition points, no electrical or gas problems. The rest of the room was unchanged aside from one detail: an orange glow throughout, where her own body fat had burned, vaporized and then cooled and condensed onto the windowpane, tinting the bright grey light from outside and adding an almost sepia nostalgia to my screams. Actually, the light in the room was very similar to the one cast by the street lamp outside Emily's window in *Bill One*, which I hadn't thought of until just now.

We lived in a maisonette nestled in the throat of a cul-de-sac. It was at the mouth of the cul-de-sac I found out: two children from the estate, unspooling from a swell of onlookers, raced towards me to be the first ones to tell. And the second thing I have to say is that the boy who won the race is my Bill.

I can't remember everything he said, just the breathless excitement of victory in his simple "your mum's [...] dead" and his remonstrations when I didn't believe him. Of course, it wasn't true just then, more a ridiculous lie from a child not yet aware of cruelty and the feelings of others. He had a smear of dirt or chocolate on his face that he seemed too old for. He didn't remember being the same boy who threw a stone at me two years earlier. I wasn't a child who people remembered. And he wasn't yet the boy whose older sister would be fatally hit by an off-patrol police car, not for another year or so.

It was impossible he could know something about my mum that I didn't. Nothing like that had ever happened before. His determination at keeping hold of the power, or frustration at the impossibility of both asserting it and keeping it, meant he sort of skipped alongside me with another boy, fatter and older and retarded in some undiagnosed way, insisting she was dead, in a fire, becoming more mocking as I refused to believe him. She burnded, he repeated. She burnded to death. The other boy still felt

some ownership of the information and became aggressive when I rejected it a second time. But Bill will always be the one who got there first.

Several years later I'd do cocaine with him and some barely mutual friends in the toilets of a comedy club close to where we grew up. They were all old school acquaintances within two or three years of each other, the sad stories who never left home and the sadder ones who left and returned carrying some obscure resentment. I was so drunk I remember pinching the coke out of the little plastic bag with my index finger and thumb and just sniffing it like that. I remember saying something about it being smoother than talcum powder as I sucked the residue off my thumb. I don't think he remembered me at all, and if he did it was only in the indistinct way one acknowledges a series of shapes that have once or twice before made their way through one's optic nerve. He snorted at me in disgust. A few seconds later I tried to lean against a cubicle partition wall that turned out to be an unlocked door. Bill and his friends left me on the floor.

It was only as I reached my house that it became true. Onlookers turned their heads from the suspense drama of a smoking building to the sad scene of the orphaned boy. One failing of school education is that children aren't taught how to perform certain scenarios. Whenever the audience's gaze falls on you it's likely you'll be underprepared. You're left to impersonate what you've seen, and if you haven't seen a lot the audience become disappointed. You can feel it.

Somewhere behind me Bill was looking on, in his mind the author of the scene.

#### MOTHERS AND FATHERS (combustion redux, state of the nation)

As is the story of my life, my mum's death was overshadowed completely by another event. I referenced it at the start: in our same city a week earlier, a little boy not quite three years old had been stolen from his mother from a shopping mall and killed by two other boys, who were a few years younger than me at the time. Having no alternative options, I was sent back to school the Monday after mum's death. There was a short extraordinary school assembly to announce mum's passing, for which I was placed on a small stage to be observed (my debut, actually), but not really any other mention of it due to the focus on the child murder to which everyone was committed. It was a welcome distraction and I was happy to be involved.

The consensus around the playground was that we would hunt these boys down and kill them. I believe they'd already been caught at this point. This coincided with a brief period of popularity for me, as other children found my ideas for torture



both original and noble. Although my career eventually took a different turn it was here I began to understand how much people enjoy assigning the duty of imagination to others.

I remember adults asking out loud how so many people could walk past the poor toddler and his killers in broad daylight and not help. How could they live with their inaction? But the children of the time – in the same city but, in my case, a different part of it, the other side, equally poor but more Catholic, so remote that it might have been anywhere in the world, but so close because we were told it was, told it was the very same city – had no interest in imagining the murder away, because we wanted to be heroes.

#### IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (difficulties of faith, cliff hangers)

Your eyes are naturally drawn to the twelfth station – Jesus dies on the cross. INRI carved above his bowed head, his posture like the first guy in a YMCA dance. I mean, they don't actually do the dance in the original video, but you know the image. And like anyone else, you immediately wonder how much Jesus knew. "Why have you forsaken me?" implies maybe he didn't know everything, or, if he did, that his own conviction wasn't exactly total. There's probably a good religious answer to that.

When I returned home from church Jazz was banging a kind of off-beat rhythm at my front door. He'd never done that before. As I got closer I saw he was gasping, blood all over his face. This is how times become much funnier, and how I get more honest.

## BILL FIVE

Each time is less euphoric than the last. Bill clutches his plastic bag not by the handles but by the bunched up fistful placed into his hand by the Pakistani girl. In his other hand he holds his credit card like a hotel room key. He feels the gaze of the girl and boy on the back of his neck as he walks toward the mechanical door, which registers his presence less easily than when he arrived. He feels how the embossed numbers of his card had pressed against his thigh before he fished it out of his pocket, his flesh doughy and pliant. Everything is heightened. The thump of his heart makes him queasy, as does the thought of blood pulsing around his body. He does not look back to the shop as he steps outside, nor as he turns right, passes the almost mirroring front window that creates the effect of a walking companion.

Again he feels the cold clinging heaviness of his damp clothes. An abrupt crack in the pavement reminds him of his worn soles, but the pain so low down feels faraway. And a new ache in his left knee, a swollen throb he cannot make sense of.

Leaves and branches long detached from trees, reduced by rain and footfall into light brown – almost white – mulch, thicken the pavement. It fringes the kerb and looks to be spreading outward, with little shoots of more vibrant weed amidst it, living within the dead. There is always some small thing at work, retracting or growing, never nothing happening. Bill thinks of the word nature as a mass of greens and browns stretching boundlessly outwards, reclaiming roads and buildings, whole cities. The idea feels warm and safe, and he wishes he could live inside it.

There is no doubt he can smell urine. He thinks about where he might buy his energy drinks in future, and to think of the future makes him sad.

Bill turns right, onto a rutty path that slopes slightly downwards between the stretch of shops and the beginning of residential housing. Moss greases the pavement so he goes slowly, the soles of his feet gripping better than those of his old shoes. A squiggle of white graffiti on a sidewall looks almost like a bird. At the end of the path Bill's house comes into view and he allows himself to think of Emily.

He reaches his front door too quickly. The sky is still pre-emptively glowing, the day hesitant to begin. But birds are calling to each other and the air has potential. From his jacket he takes the house key, a large old-fashioned bronze type a child might draw if asked to draw a key, only with an ornate bulge at the base of the stem. Or no—from his jacket he takes the house key, a long-bladed paracentric kind with teeth like a swordfish. Or it is a kind of spike key with steel teeth and an alloyed brass handle that reminds Bill of a corkscrew.

Bill cannot find his house key, despite being sure it was in his hand only seconds ago. There is an absence where there should be weight, and the lightness causes a corresponding heaviness in his stomach, as if his body is rebalancing. It must have fallen out at some point, although he is still certain it was here, can almost still feel it like a phantom limb. He continues to grasp inside his empty pocket with numb fingers. Do minutes go by, or only seconds? The thought of tracing back his movements – the shop, the canal, the police station – is exhausting. Could he go all the way back to Emily's apartment?

Either side of Bill's front door are two metal hanging baskets hooked onto ornate brackets. Perhaps this is convenient. He takes one down and empties the contents, a slotted plastic bowl filled with old soil. It lands softly on his foot, most of the soil remaining stuck. The thin base wires of the basket bend easily but the wrought iron frame is rigid. He thinks he will not be strong enough, the parts soldered to the thicker frame seem impossible to detach. His hands, ugly and white and red, or pink, claw around them, and he pulls hard enough to feel the muscles in his arms tense, then those in his shoulders and stomach. There is thinness and thickness, ease and difficulty, impossible to separate. He begins to panic—it is not often that things fail to bend to our will, that effort and desire yield nothing. But he understands there is no alternative, he must continue. He forgets if he is pulling at all, closes his eyes for a moment. Before he can think of anything else the basket comes apart in his hands.

He measuredly strikes a piece of the newly freed metal frame against the doorstep until one end is at a right angle. He straightens one of the thin wires and bends the tip into a small hook. The noise of an approaching car is building up on itself. Bill waits until the sound spreads and fades away. He is on his knees in front of the door. His palms are flecked with green paint and rust from the basket. He pushes the angled tip of the thicker metal strip into the bottom of the keyhole, turns against the resistance as gently as possible, feeling the tiniest movement. He keeps it in place with his left hand, notices the same tremble as earlier. He picks up the thin wire with his right hand, holding it at the hook between thumb and index finger. This hand, too, is trembling, but he is able to insert the wire into the top of the keyhole first time, pushing and pulling it as steadily as possible until he hears a quiet click, a change in the texture of movement. He imagines a giant fencing with an animated mouse and is, for a moment, lost somewhere inside the rhythm of the image.

Bill remembers himself and removes the wire from the lock, hands so cold and immobile he drops it twice trying to turn it around. At the third attempt he succeeds, pushes the hooked end of the wire back inside the lock and wiggles both strips of metal, slacking his muscles slightly and allowing his arms to accept their own weight. He

thinks of how much effort it takes to resist gravity. The tremor of his right hand is now helpful, naturally pushing the hook upwards against the pins in the lock. He concentrates on shifting the shake of his body into his right hand, so his left can steadily turn the metal strip downwards. There is resistance, but it is weaker than Bill's weakest force, and the final turn is abrupt. The door sighs open and sticks ajar, a clump of envelopes and magazines jamming in the gap.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS (most birds don't lead eventful lives if you think of the day-to-day)

"Getting your character through the door, into the room, is the base stuff for a writer, the hands that came before the cubes in Picasso, the noise that came before the silence in Glass. Get it right and the rest will follow." *DAWW*, p2

### HISTORIC LIST OF MY FRONT DOORS (few developments this generation)

0-2: Unknown

2-3: Unknown

3-3: Unknown

3-4: Unknown

4-7: Edwardian four-panelled oak painted dark red, possibly maroon. Bound at the upper corner of the jamb. Impossible to push open without help.

7-8: Unknown

8-9: Beige PVC aluminium framed. Dented. Out of plumb, would automatically close without wedging; would not be opened if you forgot wedging.

9-13: Thin oak frame painted brown. Two large glass panels reinforced with a wire mesh (insertion of wire mesh during production weakens glass); frosted. Rot at bottom of door. Could be forced open without key.

13-13: PVC four-panelled bright white. Brass handle, knocker, letter box and peephole; multi-point locks.

13-13: Thin oak frame painted brown. Two large glass panels reinforced with a wire mesh (insertion of wire mesh during production weakens glass); frosted. Rot at bottom of door. Could be forced open without key.

13-18: Green painted oak, brass number nine

18-20: Blue painted steel. Small porthole ~5ft from floor. Ventilation grille above porthole. Cold and heavy; safe.

20-20: White painted flush door with Masonite skin. Loose strike plate, latch banged in the wind.

20-21: Blue painted flush door with Masonite skin. Loose strike plate, latch banged in the wind.

21-30: Green painted flush door with Masonite skin. Loose strike plate, latch banged in the wind or if somebody walked past.

30-30: Thin oak frame, brownish. Two large reinforced glass panels with a wire mesh (insertion of wire mesh during production weakens glass); frosted, cracked. Bottom of door completely rotten. Could no longer be forced open without key.

30-33: Doorless frame below a leaded glass crescent window

33-33: Cardboard flap

33-present: Solid oak with wood effect veneer. Fire door, emphatic slam that makes building shake and dog lose her composure.

#### STORYTELLING (the presence of baskets, no metaphor or symbolism)

I'm wondering about baskets. Wire baskets especially, as I've now referenced them twice: shopping baskets and hanging baskets. I consulted my Checkhardt to see if there was any literary relevance. There is not: I'm treading on original literary ground. I checked the dictionary, too, which confirmed that a BASKET is what I thought it was. Also, 'Brit. informal,' is apparently a euphemism for BASTARD (in sense 2). Depending on whether sense 2 is referring to the noun or the adjective, this means the euphemistic basket is either an unpleasant or despicable person or a thing no longer in its pure or original form. I find this interesting although not particularly helpful.

#### STORYTELLING (like a what? far from symbolic)

I've learned something about writing: sometimes you get an image that doesn't really work on the page but you keep it anyway. The credit card like a hotel key thing: I know it chews its own scrote, as Jazz says. And the kind of 'money opens doors, oh but what even is money really but an ideology or fabrication or some kind of, you know, controlling thing or other' idea isn't very good, either too subtle or too obvious or not accurate. Or it just doesn't work in Bill's hands. I know all this, but I just left it anyway. Which I think says something about storytelling, although I'm not certain what.

### STORYTELLING (authorial intrusions, the flaw of fiction)

There's that paragraph that introduces the hanging baskets, where Bill empties them and begins to construct a lock picking device (see below). An obvious authorial intrusion follows: "not often do things fail to bend..." yada. Bob Hawk says an author should be like "the bassist in a good classic rock band: necessary but the audience don't give a hooley about actually seeing him there, slapping away" (*DAWW*, p5). Now I see what he means: that bit is kind of like a bassist solo coming from nowhere, nudging the singer from the stage. I guess the singer is the sentences in this analogy, or realism or something. It's only in failure that I learn my lessons. (See also: "There is always some small thing at work, retracting or growing, never nothing happening.")

### THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (the key to the door and other alternatives)

So it seems Bill can pick locks. I don't want to dwell too much on this, but I'll say that I have no idea how to pick a lock myself. One minute I was selecting for Bill the appropriate key to his front door, the next it's gone. And then comes, I admit, my least sincere writing so far: having Bill muse on how it must have fallen from his pocket, how exhausting it would be to retrace his steps. Fake form: it was me, not Bill, thinking those things. He refused each key, froze when I tried to get him to put one in the lock. Either he wanted to open the door his own way, or make it seem like a crime.

### STORYTELLING (history defeating itself)

I made the mistake earlier of giving Bill's city a history. I don't know if you recall the part with the two cooling towers? I wrote that they were a familiar sight to him. I wanted to keep cities and their histories out of this story, both mine and Bill's (there's a clue to mine early on, but it's unlikely you'll pick up on it unless you're familiar with the area or could be bothered to look it up. I suppose it doesn't really make any difference). And that was a memory of my own that didn't fit with Bill at all. He sees the towers and still gets lost, whereas for me those two towers were always the confirmation I was almost home. The saddest part is I remembered them incorrectly: it's not the cooling towers that have flashing red lights down their sides but the two tall thin chimney stacks next to them.

Bill can't be a kind of everyman. Nobody can.

THE OLD DETECTIVE (limitations of character)

Where does he wait when he's off-stage? In the corner of a gloomy pub? Office desk? There are characters that can't possibly be imagined in certain situations, necessarily so: notice that you rarely see action heroes dining, for example. Whatever the case, old detective remains off-stage. It's almost as if Bill's refusing to let him in. I wonder if he can sense his imminent arrival?

THE PRESENT MOMENT (not quite the same moment, fighting crocodilia)

Not much time has passed—still in my attic room. We're in the moment directly after the last. The last 'Present Moment' section, I mean. This is pretty much a period of waiting, a stasis before the next thing happens. What that next thing is I can't say, exactly. Right now I'm a free man staring at the floor.

So there are two reasons for this interruption. The first regards the entry above. In appendix 1 (Int. w/OD) you'll see an objection to my lack of exploration of the lock-picking scene in Bill Five. It seems the resistance comes in two parts, towards both the depiction of the act and to the flippancy of my supporting note. I accept both complaints, but have chosen not to make amendments. Please see my responses in the noted sections of appendix 1 for a more thorough reasoning.

Two: you know how sometimes you might, say, look from different angles at a large sandwich before you figure out the best way to take a bite? Or, no: how you might circle an alligator before you attempt to wrestle it? For all the talk of honesty there's a large alligator old me (as in the me writing the other bits that aren't the 'Present Moment' entries, who despite not being that far away from present me in terms of age and experience still seems like a much more naïve and vulnerable guy, so much so that I struggle to imagine him at times) is still circling up until this point (Bob Hawk: "fidelity to metaphor is like fidelity to a woman: good!" *DAWW* p2). The wind is picking up outside, which is a shame. I hate the wind. Anyway, I've realised reading back over this section that the next entry, which was initially a kind of orphan I had stuck in my Omissions (see appendix 2), is kind of my first alligator, if we're to stick with that terminology:

BILL & I (clarification, a short prose text that has more than one meaning)

Bill and I: how to explain this? It's difficult because I don't believe there's a word for it. Words I've tried to make fit include AVATAR, INCARNATION, HOMUNCULUS, GOLEM, CONSUL—none of which comes close to accurate, some of them almost the opposite, but not quite so that I could find an applicable antonym. I was barking up the wrong tree with those terms, in the sense that I was like a dog with poor judgement. And it's not simply like



Bob Hawk puts it, that one should tell their story through another person. It's been going on longer than that. I had high hopes for TRANSFERENCE but that fell flat, too. In fact, a lot of psychoanalytic terms seemed useful at first but quickly eroded into variations of the same, inaccurate, definition or topic. So I'm left with only one tool, reluctantly, which is this metaphor stuff again—describing one thing in terms of another. I'll try my best:

Say there's an indigenous community living in a small coastal area. The climate is temperate and they only look down the food chain. They live outdoors, build small fires each night for light and warmth. They sleep under the stars and, when they feel hungry and weak, eat the plants that grow around them. There are vaguely mystic beliefs, mostly a mix of wonder and fear that are not interrogated too much. There are difficult tasks that must be undertaken to live, although words like *difficult* and *task* are not part of the lexicon. They are ignorant of much around them and respectfully consider their world to be a gift there is no reason to fathom.

Then a crusading army arrives and rapes everyone, both literally and not, as tends to be the way these things go. The army is technologically advanced, rigorous in their scientific methods. They extract metals and minerals from the earth, build infrastructure and an economy. The indigenous community, post-rape, see the potential that had always been around them. Actually, I think this might partially be the plot to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or at least it seems that way from the description online. Anyway, time goes by and reparations are made; the indigenous community integrates fully into the new society. If, in your mind, the community has different ethnicity to the invaders, it's not something that prohibits them from the same rights and privileges as anyone else. The indigenous people eat and drink and sleep with much more satisfaction than they ever knew and feel a contentment that never previously existed. I suppose we have to assume everyone lives for a few centuries in this scenario. The indigenous people prosper is the point. This might have been better if I'd used the example of an individual rather than an entire tribe. Anyway, the people are very comfortable and whatnot. But every time they walk down a certain street, or drive on a road, there's a nagging remembrance of those who carved these roads in the first place, built this much more efficient world over the one they knew. The old paths, footprints impressed into the dirt, can no longer be seen under the concrete and tarmac, but they can be felt. Despite everything, the old community can't prevent a nostalgia that fatigues them greatly, occurs unexpectedly and keeps them in bed for days at a time.

I should mention that Bill is represented by the crusading army in this metaphor. Perhaps it has broken into ALLEGORY: "A story in verse or prose with two or more

meanings (e.g. *Animal Farm*, or *Watership Down*),” (Checkhardt) as it got a little long there in the end. Although, there’s no animals so I’m not sure. Maybe it doesn’t work, now that I consider it as a written-down thing. It seemed like it was going to be better than that. Something about the modernising army complicates things unhelpfully if I begin to think about how, say, the introduction of an overpass or a sewerage system applies to secondary meanings. Hopefully you get the gist, anyway.

### STORYTELLING (bleak homes, speaking of the failures of metaphor)

My reading on the subject of SHC led me to several references in works of fiction, the most famous being Dickens’ *Bleak House*. I believe this to be the most accomplished rendering of SHC in literature, although sadly metaphoric. As you’re aware by now, I’m constantly on the lookout for applicable metaphors but, while SHC might work on some level, it’s impossible to shoehorn something so real into a metaphoric... shoe. Plus I think Dickens was ambivalent about the fidelity of the metaphor: the character that combusts, Mr. Krook, was a heavy drinker and a sort of good-for-nothing—Dickens seems to suggest each trait played a big part, especially the high alcohol content inside the body as a possible explanation for the combustion. Initially I was excited by this movement from the supernatural to the scientific, although it didn’t take long to see that theory pretty easily debunked.

Yet some details are accurate, notably what Dickens calls the “thick, yellow liquor,” and the “stagnant, sickening oil” that has rested on Krook’s windowsill. As I said, it’s really more orange, but it seems like Dickens had done some research. If it was purely a metaphor for something why would he bother with accuracy?

I dwell on the metaphor issue because, during my investigations, I came across an academic thing that I initially thought was about SHC in *Bleak House* but that turned out to be a study of a Spanish novel that not only dealt with SHC but had an entire section on how it (the novel’s SHC) related to the SHC in *Bleak House*. Actual quotation from the novel was all in Spanish so I have no idea what was going on, but the big thing was that the SHC metaphor in the Spanish novel was about sex or something, which is nothing like the metaphor in Dickens – which seems more like a moral thing – and totally unrelated to my own experience. But there was something nice about finding out I was joining a conversation that had spanned centuries and languages, and that my mother didn’t just explode for nothing.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (the nurse, the beginning of an unlikely adventure)

I brought Jazz into the bathroom so he could clean his face. There was some kerfuffle with the dog when she refused to stop barking. Underneath the facial damage Jazz had an expression that seemed to suggest he wanted to kick the dog, or wanted me to kick her. Whatever, the impression I got was that of a desire for a kicked dog, so I was surprised when he requested a flannel. He in turn seemed annoyed when I said I didn't have one. I thought maybe I'd appease him by giving the dog a slight nudge with my knee but he made his way to the bathroom sink without comment and started running warm water.

I say warm, it takes a while to heat up. I was self-conscious of the sagging damp in the corner of the bathroom ceiling but Jazz didn't seem to mind. After he'd rubbed cold or cool water onto his face it was clear the blood was coming from three holes: each of his nostrils and a small puncture in his eyebrow from which immediately bulged a little dark red berry each time he wiped it. His didn't seem like the only blood on him, but it was the only blood he was himself bleeding.

His hair was very closely cropped and his whole scalp was visible apart from one stain that turned out to be some sort of blood-coloured dirt—blood being brown at this stage, in the surprisingly well-suited light of my bathroom. It's interesting – or maybe it isn't – how often the word *blood* comes up when one's dealing with the bleeding. I'm always surprised that we're filled with the stuff.

Jazz either stated or asked 'there's no Grace in here,' to which I replied that it was sometimes hard to tell. Then he impatiently jabbed his finger at the brown stain and told me to help. I found a white hand towel and dabbed it into the soapy, orange water that filled the sink. The stain was stubborn. The rubbing rolled Jazz's head back and forth so he couldn't concentrate on his own washing. He didn't complain and had already moved onto a new task: from somewhere he'd found two ear buds, using them like chopsticks to pinch closed the wound on his eyebrow. I was afraid he was going to ask me to sew it together, but it seemed to stick by itself.

When I'd finished, Jazz's head was clean and shiny in places, dark in others. His bristles of hair were so sharp they'd left pink scratch marks where they'd caught my wrist. There was a point we both stopped, were we agreed the nursing was as complete as it needed to be. It was when Jazz pulled from his pocket an envelope and a plastic wrap of skunk, its crystals glistening in the bathroom light. The bulging stalactite on the ceiling dripped a swollen droplet that burst right between my eyebrows, confirming social norms had been restored.

We were very quickly stoned. Jazz never ate in my presence; his whole body was sinew and bone, coiled and agitated, and I supposed he didn't eat a lot generally—he seemed somehow self-fuelling. But the weed made me hungry, gave me the kind of nausea that puts you off food. This is the feeling that reminds me to eat. When I walked into the kitchen I heard Jazz turning on the television, or trying. It occurred to me this was the first time he'd been into my home. I'd always go to him and, on the occasions he'd insist I sit and smoke with him, the appropriate atmosphere for such socialising, he seemed to believe, was a rapid skipping between ten or twelve music channels on cable, songs jarring or meshing against each other, perhaps creating some sort of transient musical masterpieces. But I didn't have cable, and since digital replaced analogue a few months earlier I had no television at all.

From the kitchen it sounded like Jazz had kicked the TV. I was imagining myself as some kind of famous nurse, a great nurse who cared for many selflessly. Although they would have to be good people, I thought, as an obscure Middle Eastern image came to mind, desert and ruined buildings, distant explosions, crying children. Another nurse enters, beautiful, who is my aid because I'm now a doctor. There's a media presence, as they say: a reporter and a camera man. I tell them to get out – I guess we're in some sort of tent – as it's not safe and I want no recognition. They film me anyway, and the beautiful nurse behind me, who has lost her entire family in the war, accompanies me to the award ceremony much later, weeping as I tell the audience, with humility, that it was simply a job I had to do, that it is not heroic but merely human, and, with a little severity, repeat to them the story of the young boy, the brother of my new nurse wife, a child, who died in my arms—say to them once more, it is not heroic, merely human. Jazz interrupts with some weird falsetto singing, apparently deciding to entertain himself.

I didn't have a lot of choice for food. I had instant noodles, but felt self-conscious about slurping them in front of Jazz. I stuffed my mouth with peanuts and ground down on them as quietly as I could. Then I came back into the living room with two clementines, offering one to Jazz. Only if you pick off the white shit, said Jazz. I laughed, or at least I attempted a laugh. Certain parts of his face – the violent blood vessels in his eyes, the eyebrow wound, the lip that had fattened like a bloated slug since I'd been in the kitchen – made it hard to gauge his seriousness. So I stood and peeled a clementine in front of him, before pulling away the pith, wondering if I should inform him of the health benefits.

ON EMILY (work experience, a biographical story, how elucidation insists on a more formal tone)

Please don't think I've forgotten about Emily. Sometimes I have a tendency to get caught up in my own worries, but she's still the most important part of this story.

Of the five pleasure industries for the human senses, Emily had worked customer service in each. The first two were coincidental: receptionist at the head office of a high-end olive oil company, and the temporary complaints line of a music label who had accidentally dispatched over 300,000 faulty compact discs to stores.

The third, a cinema job, combined one of her favourite things – viewing the monitors that screened the audience watching whatever film was on – with the unenjoyable task of telling people to take their feet off the head rests of the seats in front. After her first few days, Emily stopped telling people to please remove their feet from the head rests. She watched them on camera, always confident boys in groups of three or four, or less confident boys with a girl, trying to look more confident, but had had enough of the worry involved with being assertive. There was also something about asking, a sense of ownership of the head rests that she didn't feel entitled to, not even in her blouse with her name and the cinema logo embroidered at her breast (“what's the other one called?” being the most frequent comment she received from men – she carried this memory like a tender wound for ever after). This went on for some time, until the cinema manager informed everyone at a staff meeting that certain head rests towards the back were severely worn. He looked directly at Emily as he said this. He was balding emphatically, although she remembered him from the year below her in school so could have been no older than twenty-three. He was also short, with bad skin and a quick temper. She said the combination made her feel sorry for him. She knew he remembered her too, although neither mentioned it. After the meeting he started sitting with her in the small room that contained the monitors and kiosk stock, syrup pouches to refill the drinks, big tubs of powder that eventually became melted cheese. Sometimes he wouldn't be wearing his wedding ring, other times he would keep his left hand in his pocket. Emily was not stupid.

Her father suggested, from his armchair, the newspaper freshly folded below his eye line, that she apply for the cinema job. They were hiring, he said, which was about as great an acknowledgement of her existence as he had made in a long time, or of anything. Emily's big sister Jess had recently attempted suicide by trying to jump off the bungalow roof, and it was one of many incidents that had left her father quiet, probably wondering what, exactly, he was supposed to do.

She wrote this in an email. In some way I never fully learned, the cinema manager became her first client in the touch industry. Of course, how could it be any other way? Why would he exist if not for that? She never told me about the fifth sense, must've forgotten about it or realised too late it would be anticlimactic after her allusions to what happened after a late shift at the cinema. That's what I like about ink and paper, there's much less temptation to go back and change the way you tell a story. She wrote her emails like letters.

## BILL SIX

Bill leaves the broken pieces of basket on the doorstep, picks up his plastic shopping bag. There is a burgeoning rumble of another approaching car. He squeezes through the gap between door and frame and walks inside, through the hall and into the kitchen, lets the bag slip from his fingers. It is only when the energy drinks clunk on the floor that he wonders if he paid for the shopping. The dog is moving excitedly in the locked pantry, her tail booming against the hollow plasterboard walls. Bill folds open the bisecting door and she leaps out, past him, slides across the linoleum and is unable to stop herself crashing headfirst into a cupboard. She turns unhurt and bounds over, jumps up and paws him, licks his wrists and digs her long claws into the skin above his beltline, folding a layer painfully over the top of his buckle. It feels like a long time since he was last touched, and he wonders why nobody tried to help him to his feet in the minimarket.

The dog's water bowl is dry and Bill wonders how long she could survive without him. He fills it from the tap and throws a handful of small biscuits onto the floor. She laps up the water first then quickly crunches through the food. He pours in some more water, his hand sensitive to the digging metal tap head. Under each of his fingernails there is a perfect arc of blue. Bill wonders when they first appeared.

The dog is nosing inside the shopping bag. Bill gently ushers her to the water bowl with his foot. She is uninterested and walks away carrying an old tea towel in her mouth, no longer excited to see him. Bill lifts the bag up onto the kitchen table and unpacks the milk, teabags and energy drinks in a neat line. There is a receipt at the bottom of the bag, blank on both sides.

Without needing to put them to his ear he hears the energy drinks fizzing inside their tins. He realises he should have bought food, but the slight pain of hunger in his stomach feels good. He unscrews the plastic lid of the milk bottle and unpeels the protective film underneath. It smells...milky. He pours a little into the sink, so it mixes cloudily with the puddles of tap water. They turn weakly white and swirl in streaks down the plughole.

Again, he is unsure what next. Should he notice more of his kitchen? He looks around, tries to see the familiar objects as more than just shapes. A bare wooden table once lacquered has a still unnatural dulled shine, softly the edges wear away. The utensils are in closed drawers. Bill needs something, he thinks, and opens the drawer with the oldest looking handle, bronzed and tacky with grease and dust. It contains orderly clusters of knives, forks and spoons, tea-stained tea spoons, each fork spoke

browned on the inside like a rotten tooth. Bored, he forgets why he opened the drawer, looks to the linoleum floor, its edges curling up and splitting near the walls, looks then to the window, his own slight reflection ghostly, eyeless, and back down to the sink and the thousands of silvery scratches. The clock ticks slowly.

The clock! A grandfather clock in the hallway is documenting the passing of time. Bill hears the high, sweet tick and waits. It feels like the deep resolution of the tock takes more than a second to come. He decides to check, leaves the open milk bottle next to the sink to breathe.

The grandfather clock is ominous, taller than Bill, dark mahogany stained almost black in parts, dust embedded into every crevice. At the top of the clock face is a smaller dial that counts out the sixty seconds of a minute. The bent little finger of the dial is barely moving at all, almost like the broken leg of a twitching sparrow. Two full seconds pass between the next tick and tock, each sounding both hesitant and surprised. The empty space between them fills too quickly with thoughts of Emily and Jess and the old detective. Bill imagines a bucket: in each gap of silence cold water rushes into it, overflowing. He decides he should wash himself and sleep.

Upstairs Bill peels off his clothes, drapes them over the bannister to dry. In the bathroom he plugs the bathtub and twists the stiff brass tap for hot water. He is careful not to look at the mirror or to spend too much time thinking of his body. There is a twitching sensation in the left part of his abdomen that is both painless and unbearable. Unbearable is the word he thinks of, and it seems correct even if it cannot be, for he is bearing it. He snorts a laugh at the thought, twists the cold tap open, hopes the noise of water can block out his mind.

His eyelids feel heavy, graininess underneath them against his eyeballs. Bill is so happy to think he might soon sleep he has to concentrate not to get too excited, breathing slowly and trying to keep the image from the box of teabags in his mind, a steaming cup on a windowsill, a green hill and flowers in the backdrop. The bathwater storming into itself is both strong and soft, and he leans closer so it becomes louder than anything else.

Jess and Emily are in the room Bill had been in earlier today, or yesterday. He is there, too, sitting facing Jess, Emily to his right, a thin table between them. When the young officer brought Bill to the room he was left alone for long enough that it felt like home, but now it does not. The young detective sat where Emily is now, the old detective in Jess's seat. The carpet is the same, the blank white walls, the orange plastic chair.



They are his interrogators. Jess plays bad cop very well, screams at him, asks how he managed to lift Emily up and hang her like that. Emily is sad cop. She holds her face in both hands. She has violent rope burns around her throat. Bill can't see her face, just her red hands with their long thin fingers and white blotches, her shaking shoulders. Jess is furious, saying

- you made her into Giotto's fucking *Despair*!

which is really more like something Emily might say. Maybe she is saying it too: it is hard to hear beneath her hands and Jess's much louder voice, which spits out the 't' and 'p' sounds in *Giotto* and *Despair*.

When Bill opens his eyes no time at all seems to have passed. Water is still pouring into the bathtub. He wonders who Giotto is. Isn't everybody in your dreams supposed to be you?

He leaves the bathroom, tries to be quiet as he steps naked downstairs, careful not to wake the dog and remind her she might need the toilet, and into the lounge. The thick curtains are drawn almost shut – a small gap at the top allows a sliver of light. There is a still coldness, or a cold stillness, that feels like a cold dampness or a damp chill. It makes Bill feel like an intruder. He shuffles, sore feet dirty against the carpet. At the drinks cabinet he kneels before the varnished wooden door, his face distorted back at him. He turns the little key in its little lock, enjoying the littleness of it all, the innocent twist and click of the brass, the long happy creak of the door opening, the frail must that drifts from inside and dissipates in seconds.

There are dusty bottles he is scared of. He is scared of the Advocaat, its thick custard yellowness. He is scared of the bottle of muscat, which, despite never being opened, is only three quarters full. He is scared of something called *Chartreuse*, an empty bottle with a film of green at its base, unmarked aside from a sticky label with the word written unevenly in pencil. He is scared of them because it seems impossible they are not poisonous.

He takes out a near full bottle of whiskey, failing to avoid the naughty clinky clinks against the other bottles. In the kitchen he finds a glass and places it on the table, rests three fingers next to its side and pours the whiskey up to the top finger, his index. He dilutes it with an energy drink, and the greenness vanishes in the alcohol.

He gulps it down. Three gulps. His record is two. It stings his tongue and throat. He pours another in the same way, enjoys the warmth stretching through his body, all the way to his hands and feet, imagines that his face is like the green image on the energy drink tin, his eyes like spirals. The clock ticks again, then again, without a tock.

He picks up a toothbrush from the windowsill above the sink. He finishes the second drink and walks out into the hallway. A streetlamp still glowing outside casts an orange shaft of light through the stained glass pane above the door. It is Bill's spotlight. He brings the toothbrush up to his lips like a microphone and closes his eyes. The frayed bristles tickle his lips. He decides on an older piece. He says hello. He says hi, how are you, flatly, like the girl in the shop. There is nervous laughter from the crowd.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS (I myself haven't touched the stuff since 1993)

"If you mention clocks in your writing you should stop. The clocks that is! In literary history nothing has been more intriguing than the presence of a stopped clock. Try to avoid the most famous times a clock has stopped (1:50, 10:10, 4:50; twenty to nine; 13 o'clock, 6:66) and find a time of your own that has great meaning. Despite the brittle veneer of ignorance each fellow lacquers over his sensibility, he cannot escape his own finitude, his own relation to linear time." (DAWW, p2)

### STORYTELLING (timing and persuasion, a stopped clock's wrong almost all the time)

According to a pretty scientific-looking article somebody posted on wrestlenow.net, we convince ourselves that we hear a tock after a tick, even though there's only ever a tick, over and over. How else are we capable of deluding ourselves? Why do we insist on resolutions? Maybe I'm wrong about every story needing a resurrection.

### STORYTELLING (technical difficulties of wondering, the wondering man)

Bill wonders, Bill wonders, Bill wonders. I guess we don't think out our wonder in words, which is why it feels such a cumbersome thing to write down. But I *had* to have so many in the last section. There was no better word. Actually, checking the definition, I'm wondering exactly when "I wonder" became a reflexive everyday verb? Probably after it was already well known in the astonishing miracles context, which makes contemporary usage seem slightly ironic. Maybe I'm wrong, but writing this thing has forced me to notice the omnipresence of irony in my own speech, and what that might mean. Example: I make no distinction between starting a sentence "I like the way," "I love the way," or "I hate the way." I can use any of these openings to express, say, my feelings about the way telemarketers call around dinner time (trying to think of a broad examples) without feeling like I've compromised my sentiment, aside from maybe the last example containing a discomforting bluntness, leaving no space between myself and my intent. I wonder if it's a common thing to shy away from language that's too precise, too close to the feeling it represents? I wonder.

If it's not too much trouble give this one a go in both Woody and Blessed and see which one best fits.

STORYTELLING (the infection of myself, good cops)

The kitchen and Bill's acknowledgement of who'd know Giotto's work—there's a lot more of me than there needs to be in this section. I keep coming back to this concern, like I'm fraudulent for allowing bits of myself to interfere with the purity of nothingness in Bill's movements; as if he can bloom into something wonderful if I give him time and space. Main Uncle once said something about everybody feeling like a fraud, or that any decent person feels fraudulent sometimes. Something like that, anyway.

STORYTELLING (dog logistics, fear of flooding)

Giving Bill a dog is probably a mistake. I have enough trouble moving him around without a mutt in the room for him to trip over. But she was actually pretty docile, much less resistant than Bill. I wanted to get him into the bath, clean him up, put on fresh clothes, but he refused. For all I know the water is still running, overflowing from the tub.

STORYTELLING (shitty writing, drinking)

The 'broken leg of a twitching sparrow' makes no sense, does it? The twitching leg of a broken sparrow? or the twitching leg of a dying sparrow who fell and broke his leg? No wonder Bill's starting to ignore me. Or no wonder he took a few drinks. I have to admit the little drinks cabinet Bill went to is the same one I mentioned in my mother's old house, which oddly never seemed to need refilling. Like me, my mother tried never to leave the house. I think Bill's happier inside, too, although not with the total confidence one expects of a person in their own home. Terrible-sounding cocktail he put together—his choice, not mine. I hope he's a good drunk.

STORYTELLING (a gap in time, shortcuts and black holes)

A technical issue that I couldn't find a resolution for in either Hawk or Checkhardt: the bit between Bill at the grandfather clock and then upstairs getting ready to bathe. I didn't like leaving his journey upstairs to be represented by a blank space, just a tap on

the return key. Or, rather, it felt like cheating, because I was awfully bored at the idea of getting him upstairs. Again, a common thing I'm finding is that he doesn't seem to want to go where I need him, but maybe that's just because he's bored, too. Whatever, I took a shortcut and skipped ahead in time, left out each step Bill had to have made on the staircase. It might seem like a small thing but I'm not so sure.

THE FORMLESSNESS OF BILL (taking shape, bearing painlessness, the honesty of laughter)

Although, despite the above, the first paragraph about Bill in the bathroom was pleasing to me due to the little laugh he snorts, which is a genuine one and not something manufactured by me. That which we bear... something or other—who said suicide was the only question worth considering? I snorted my own laugh at his own, felt a little warmer to him since that shit he pulled with the front door key.

THE PRESENT MOMENT (a change in the weather)

A little more time has passed. The wind has picked up, turned into a kind of storm. This is incredibly appropriate, or prescient or foreboding or whatever; so much that I hesitate to mention it. But I've been hesitating a lot so far and it's time for a change.

The reason I'm slipping back in here is a little embarrassing: I've made such a pretty significant omission—another alligator, if you like. I can't believe I've missed something so fundamental to the story, or avoided it or whatever, but there you go: I'm no novelist. And please don't think there's something manipulative about my actions. It's not like there's anything to gain from holding this back, either. If anything it's unhelpful. The thing is this:

Jess and I were married for three years, a couple for almost twelve. That obviously complicates things, but, honestly, they become untangled fairly quickly as the story goes on.

It's just that for whatever reason I didn't manage to provide this necessary information sooner. Not 'whatever' reason, no: it's structural or something. A technical failure I've had to patch up rather than repair or, you know, correct. I mean, an ANALOGY could be that if you're building, say, a house, and you notice it's sinking, your best bet is probably to just go and build a better house somewhere else. Your second best option is to chop down some nearby trees, I think, or pay someone who knows what to do. And your last option, if you care a lot about the house, or just stuck with it, is pretty much to wedge something in the gap and hope the entire thing doesn't fall apart while you're inside. Still, if you're into reading into things then maybe it's interesting that I've gone so long without thinking to mention my marriage, that there's something intriguing about it? I mean, I even made a vague reference to it much earlier in the story, if you remember. Or maybe I'm just a terrible storyteller. Anyway, I'm

*sorry!*

ON JESS (dreams, open to interpretation)

Dream recollection ahead! It's a cool grey morning. I disembark a boat with Jess, a cruise ship, I think, no other passengers around. We alight onto an undercover pier. I use the word 'alight' because as we step from the boat there's a palpable shift in our weight: the boat rises very slightly and the wooden pier creaks under our weight. It's that sort of vivid dream.

There are two walkways that resemble jet bridges, where the dream-making bit of my brain cuts a few corners. Jess and I agree it's best to separate. You're thinking my unconscious isn't very creative, I know, but there's tenderness in this moment: like all of my dreams there's a sense of foreboding and lurking threat. Bread and butter for the psychoanalyst here, but we both feel that only one direction is safe. I suppose what resonates most is that I'm not totally unaware, especially after having this dream several times, that I'm the dreamer and Jess is the dreamed, that the thin veils of tears that magnify her eyes as we part are my own invention.

My walkway leads out onto a dilapidated concrete square surrounded by grey buildings. The nature Bill wondered about earlier has already begun to reclaim the area, weeds inching through gaps on the floor, cracking the pavement and climbing up building walls. I can see a city in the distance. It seems this is where I need to be, that the task is to find some sort of solace or sensibility. But distant voices disturb me: a row of windows lit, busy inside with people. Jess is there, and it looks like they are queuing up for some kind of buffet, holding paper plates. The end of the dream is always the same: I track back to the other walkway in search of the room and get lost in a series of identical grey corridors before eventually waking up. Look, I know this isn't the best story, but I have to give Jess some sort of introduction. This is the best I can do. She was, beyond anything, a senseless bloody nightmare.

ON JESS AND EMILY<sup>1</sup> (mundane instigators, the performing body)

Where to start when there's a stockpile of memories? You're inclined to look outside, at the birds in the trees, anxiously flitting from one branch to another. It's as if they have

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<sup>1</sup> PRESENT MOMENT REDUX: I was making an edit to a later section (MOTHERS AND FATHERS (burning in hell, common fantasies)) when I realised I've missed an important detail: Jess and Emily are/were very attractive women. Even I, despite the recent betrayals of my body, have inherited from my mother acceptable features around the nose and cheekbone area. You might want to factor this into the reasons my comedy career wasn't as successful as it might've been.

no plan, no grand idea, even though we're told they must. A woman walks on the path below, on her way to work. She holds a mobile phone in both hands like a hymnal, which is too loaded a simile but also true. She's dressed in black ballet shoes and black stockings, on top a beige raincoat. Shorter than Columbo's (who I now realise might just be the missing element for my old detective), with more shape to it, tight and flexed-in at the waist. A lot of time has been concentrated on the way women curve at the waist. You notice this and try to forget you're a man writing about what's happening outside your window.

The two sisters weren't much alike in their shape or dress. Jess had an old-fashioned body she clothed in a modern style, Emily a pubescent frame that she mostly covered in charity shop dresses, always slightly ill-fitting in one way or another. Neither made much effort with their underwear, but for only one of them did this stir a fellow erotically. Why am I being weirdly formal? On separate occasions, years apart, each performed a striptease for me, slowly shedding the costumes they chose to wear. Jess contextualised the show in a protective irony, each movement a slightly exaggerated parody or pastiche of the form. It definitely felt more like parody at times. She was anxious for it not to be merely imitation, to be something above imitation. Emily took the whole thing more earnestly. While both were too slow – and the nudity of the climaxes oddly underwhelming – the measure of each performance was different. They both dressed as schoolgirls, neither time at my request. Jess tied pigtails in her hair and had a lollipop as a prop. Her short skirt failed to cover the black suspenders attached to a garter belt. The uniform had a whiff of cardboard newness. Emily wore the very uniform she had in high school, scuffed old shoes and white socks with a frilled cuff, a dark blue pleated skirt and light blue blouse. She was upset she couldn't find her old school tie.

A male stripper generally performs to a group of women, who laugh in anticipation of a punch-line that's normally flaccid. Watch the way most women react to the floppy dick and balls and you're reminded of schoolgirls being tormented by boys wielding earthworms. A woman stripping for a lone man has no elements of comedy, absolutely no punch line at all. You have to take it seriously.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (the third person, a misunderstood proposition)

Jazz has a tendency to bring a third-person-self into a conversation, which would please Bob Hawk. He's here for good skunk but Jazz knows he don't even *know* good skunk, Jazz would say. Or, Jazz can sense the complete absence of Grace. Or, one minute he's

peeling oranges for Jazz like Jazz's King... Kong, the next he's asking Jazz to shank someone for him. I didn't request a shank, incidentally, and I'm not sure Jazz's definition of the term is specific to a single action.

STORYTELLING (the art of comedy, drowning sorrows)

There's actually nothing odd about pretending your toothbrush is a microphone and imagining your way through a routine, at least not if you're a comedian or an aspiring one. It's pretty much standard. And doing it naked makes sense, too, in a way. You're stripped pretty bare up on that stage. It was a relief that Bill seemed happy to go along with this, anyway. Maybe it was the drink.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (barter economy, religious misunderstanding)

I don't ask Jazz about his bloody incident. Although he regularly alludes to a gangster-like life, on several occasions I've seen him arrive home in an over-sized suit and shirt, still wearing a lanyard and security pass for the call centre of what looks like a bank. My guess is he works in sales, as there's something about his blasts of hostility that I recognise from working the same job as a younger man. Considering whatever he's just been through I save him the effort of having to make up a lie, which would only be a variation of a 1970s crime lord film. Instead, in exchange for my tending to his wounds, preparing his food, I ask him for a favour. Which leads on to me having to admit something about my reengagement with Catholicism.

REPORT ON TAXI DRIVER REACTION TO MIDNIGHT DROP-OFF (form and meaning)

Time: 12:04

State: Mostly sober, caffeinated

Company: AAA Taxi

Driver: Female, 40s-50s, large, blonde-yellow hair. Old, smudged letters tattooed onto each finger that are impossible to read: does not seem to say 'LOVE' and 'HATE,' as is common.



Car: Large and red, 'lived-in': fast food wrappers and other detritus stuffed under each seat.

Conversation: Location queried. Reasons queried. Some concern shown. Driver spoke of son, deceased for over a decade.

Duration: 18 minutes

Fare: £7.40

Reaction: Driver initially refused to disengage central locking. Driver was unresponsive to reassurances. Driver consents to unlock door only after threat of formal complaint to Gail at AAA

Taxi

Result: Some hope

## BILL SEVEN

Bill is hot, he knows, despite the layer of cooled sweat on his skin. His bedroom is lit yellow exactly like Emily's lounge. The set lasted a long time, his mind feels over-exercised. He slowly drops onto the bed, face first, then turns and squeezes his chilly penis with his hand. He rolls back his foreskin with two knuckles and presses against the tacky flesh, sniffs his fingers but cannot smell the usual smell.

A hunger pain twists. He tries breathing slow, deep gulps, sighing them out. It feels nice but he is worried about seeing Emily and Jess again if he stays still for too long. He struggles from the bed and over to the computer in the corner of the room. The carpet is soft under his feet. His penis begins to grow.

Bill presses the large creaking button in the middle of the tower and the computer fan whirrs almost in relief, like it, too, had been holding its breath. He listens to the order of beeps that follow, each one both lessening and increasing his anticipation. The energy drinks he consumed have not taken away his tiredness, only mixed it with restlessness. From his window, a beautiful sunrise spilling evenly across the horizon, backlighting dark purple clouds. It does not interest him, even though he thinks it should. He keeps staring, hoping to be moved, but his eyes begin to water angrily. His computer monitor lights up.

Four clicks: one-two to access the internet; three, a slower, duller click that opens a long list of options, places the computer remembers Bill has previously visited. Four, after a pause, is a lighter click, guiltier, as he chooses LiveXXXCams and waits for the world to show itself.

Several familiar faces are frozen in their little boxes, a green outline to say whether or not they are also at their computers like Bill. Maria from Sweden has a new picture, the camera very close to her face. She likes fantasy books and Bill wishes he did, too. Laura from England is in green like always. She is probably arguing with someone as she gets very angry almost every day. HornyCouple69 are smiling, which is deceptive. He sees Grace's blurred picture, but she is squared in grey, somewhere else.

At this time of day there are many Asian women at their computers. Some seem to have only just arrived home from work, and soft leather briefcases and grey skirts are usually in the background of their apartments. Their kitchen and living room is always in the same space.

He is surprised that he does not want to see Grace today. She normally makes him feel happy, even though he thinks she feels sad herself. But he wants something

else, and scrolls through the green boxes until one seems to emphasise itself to him. Kym. She is pouting and holding a finger to her lips. She is wearing a striped tie. Unlike Grace, she is pretty in the photograph. Bill clicks.

It takes a few seconds to load. Jess starts to make her way back into Bill's head, her greasy ponytail and tight, angry face.

Bill has only ever paid for Grace, although he need not have. She regularly does things for free that would cost money with other girls. He likes to get drunk with her and talk about her boyfriend, Van. He hits her, she says, when he's having a hard time or she is acting up. She has a second profile online, a couple cam with Van, but Bill cannot watch it. He likes to see her alone with her new purple-brown bruises. She presses on them for him. He doesn't mind paying.

He does not want to pay for Kym, although he does want to watch her. The profile states in capital letters that she costs 500 tokens for a private show. The website remembers Bill's credit card, so all it needs is one more click, which he makes. The screen timer swirls.

Emily and Jess attempt to stage another scene in the interrogation room but this time they are too slow. When Kym appears the camera is at a slightly different angle to her profile picture, below her chin and pointed upwards. Her face is different now, shadowed. She is in her underwear, which is white and very clean. She stands up on her bed unsteadily and begins to sway, looking down and away from the camera. She is playing some kind of music Bill does not recognise, and he keeps the sound turned low. His penis is stiff and hard, although it doesn't feel like part of him as he begins to stroke it. Kym takes off her bra and underpants very quickly and stays standing. There is a scroll of text comments to the right of the screen that reminds Bill he is not the only one watching. The first two say 'nice' and 'yeah,' which Kym ignores. A third comment appears: 'do u hv ny stkngs bb?' to which Kym stops dancing and responds. Bill likes Grace because she doesn't type her responses but just talks into the camera. Kym types slowly: 'i do but there in the wash'. She stands back on the bed and dances again, the music too fast. She starts rubbing her hand over her groin and moaning. There are two small teddy-bears propped against her pillow and the bed is half-made. One bear slumps into a depression Kym's foot makes as she widens her stance. Then she bends her knees into a squatting position and puts her middle finger inside her vagina. The skin inside her thighs is translucent, and in the veins underneath Bill thinks he can see other faces. She moves her finger in and out very quickly, out of time with her moaning. She places her free hand behind her, close to the face of the other bear, and raises her hips so her vagina and anus can be seen more clearly.

Bill's semen surprises him. It hits Kym's rumpled duvet and her face, although a lot of it lands on his desk and keyboard. He doesn't feel an orgasm so carries on, but his penis immediately becomes very tender and begins to diminish.

He has no tissues. He wipes at the screen with his fingers until the semen vanishes somewhere else. Kym's arms must have started to ache as she is now prostrate, stretching her anus wide open with her fingers, still only a tiny hole. She decides this pose is futile and turns over again, uses both hands to put her right foot behind her head. Her expression has not changed, and Bill understands that this is a practiced routine, with Kym counting down a set time in her head for each position.

He clicks one more time on the little token box, another 500. Kym doesn't smile or say thanks, just a short nod of acknowledgement. Bill decides on one more drink, to attain the perfect level of drunkenness. But first a little lie down. Just for a few seconds.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS (of the three universal truths – sex, death and taxes – I only accept the first)

“There’s no reason to pretend we’re not all here because of sex. A writer refraining from talking about sex is either a coward or a children’s author. Sex and oxygen, food and shelter: these are the things we each have in common. What purpose does literature have if not to celebrate the common human condition? Sex, in its many permutations, is happening everywhere, all of the time. Writing sex, and writing it well, is one of the biggest and hardest tasks for the novelist. It’s not just the nuts and bolts that need attention. One must find a way to excite, to stimulate: you want to make dicks hard and pussies wet, no matter what else you want to be saying. But one must find his own way to explore his relationship with Eros. Faking it never works.

“On genitalia there are many metaphors to use. Try to be original!” (*New Nevadan Erotic Writers: An Anthology*, p1, Hawk Press)

### STORYTELLING (sex and the internet)

It felt odd using words like ‘penis’ and ‘vagina,’ but I couldn’t think of any metaphors. They’re not sexy words, but then sexual acts themselves don’t seem very sexy a lot of the time, or at least the descriptions of them don’t. It seems a necessary effort to distance oneself from the biological if the aim is to be sexy.

And the internet: I assumed I’d have something to say about the internet but not a lot comes to mind. I do belong to a particular historic period: a witness to the advent of dial-up, which was initially bewildering and exciting (then, quickly after, tedious and boring), until the introduction of broadband, which made the world an entirely less patient place. Although I’ve noticed recently that even the broadest of bands can’t funnel the increasing amounts of information being given and taken without clogging up a little.

### SOMETHING ABOUT ORGASMS (am I missing something?)

I’ll stick with the male: doesn’t it say something interesting about reproduction that we’ve evolved a little treat at the end to make it worth our while? If men ejaculated without experiencing the pleasure sensation, well, let’s just say... I mean there wouldn’t

be many schools. Or, no, something about toy companies. I mean, INTERESTING (**in an interesting condition**: archaic, euphemism (of woman) pregnant) is obviously one word for it, anyway.

### STORYTELLING (healing the body)

I press on a bruise, therefore I am – seems a compelling argument to me. But what of pressing on the bruise of somebody else, or having them do it?

**bruise** *n*: an injury without laceration, creating a discolouration of the skin or the body through haemorrhaging of underlying blood vessels; a seeping of blood under the skin; damage to the flesh of an animal, fruit or plant due to impact or collision

**bruise** *v*: to cause bruising; to contuse; to damage the emotions of another

I suppose the difference is that bruises on fruit never heal, only worsen. Pressing at a bruise on human skin is like lingering on a memory that will eventually vanish.

### BITS (remember: voice deep and uninflected (not a Blessed Bit))

One of my most popular bits, before my ignominy, was the true story of losing my virginity, which happened to be anal sex rather than vaginal. Giving, not receiving. Despite claims from classmates, she did not have a learning disability. She was actually the older sister of Thomas Doran, the bean-headed boy I mentioned back in the notes to Bill Two. The whole Doran family were a bit odd, I admit, but not in any way that could be clinically determined.

After gaining access I endeavoured with gusto. There were some problems and consequences.

- Problem One: at certain angles one might simultaneously pump air into an orifice as one is penetrating it.
- Problem Two: some individuals consider any occasion of breaking wind to be highly amusing.
- Problem Three: some individuals laugh so excessively they urinate
  - Consequence of Problems One & Two: a violent full-body vibration not dissimilar to striking a brick wall with a golf club
  - Consequence of Problems Two & Three: the eruption of a hot fluid one initially mistakes for a hitherto unknown anal secretion; fear of having broken the anus

- Consequences of Problems One, Two & Three: in addition to anal sex, one realises they have partaken in two other activities: urolagnia (watersports; golden shower), and 'shaft shaking,' a new type of activity niche enough to not yet have earned official terminology

COMEDY (no lol, Bill Clinton going to hell with a smile on his face)

The joke I referenced earlier, about the fat girl and the liquorice shoelace—I've been trying to figure out why it failed. Despite what I said earlier, it can't just be that telling a joke about a fat girl is in poor taste, can it? If we break it down: a girl larger than what one might consider normal (or even polite) colludes with a group of friends ('the popular obese girl' is a book of its own, I think) to humiliate a boy (why me? we always ask) by instigating desire (vulnerability, hubris) and then rejecting the attempt to quench the desire, or resolve it, or attain it, or whatever it is one does with desire. The desire is partly sexual (bringing lips closely together, sharing saliva, phallic connotations albeit reversed) and partly infantile (confectionary, mock sensual, obscure lumps rather than breasts). The planned public rejection has the cruelty of childishness (an omitted detail of the event is that the girl came back over twenty minutes later, another liquorice lace between her teeth, this one longer and not wet with her saliva, and encouraged me to take a bite, which I did. There was nobody around for the second take, and it was clearly a guilt-borne act of mercy or repentance or something) that we very rarely witness or enact as adults (do we? It seems in bad taste almost all of the time. Why is that? One might say that experience heightens our empathy, or perhaps our sense of shame. Maybe it's not that we become better, more empathetic, but that shame erodes our sense of enjoyment?). Was it too vivid, too detailed? People like to laugh at the parts they fill in themselves, the well-placed hollows a good comedian leaves, so a real sense of community develops in a room through the laughter of self-acknowledgement and self-congratulation. Or was it that the story had no revenge scene, no payback; that it merely ended in loss much like death is life's ending, reminded the audience in some obscure way that there is never a genuinely 'good' ending?

Back on point, I think it had something to do with omission, or lack thereof. I recall a long time ago hearing a Bill Clinton joke, about him and the pope dying around the same time and mistakenly being sent to the wrong afterlives (an amusing joke about the admin department in purgatory almost came to me, but like so much else immediately fluttered away): Clinton to heaven and the pope to hell. The mix-up is

spotted and rectified very quickly and they're both sent to the places they apparently deserve to be, but, during their transfers, cross paths at, say, the escalators or whatever that take them to their respective destinies. They chat briefly, politely, and the pope expresses his desire to meet the Virgin Mary, at which time Bill Clinton responds that she's no longer a virgin. Boom.

That's how I recall the joke, there or thereabouts. The timing and delivery can be improved, of course: imitating the voices of the characters helps: the pope says "My son, it has always been my greatest wish to meet Our Blessed Virgin Mother," to which Clinton drawls sleazily "Not so much a virgin anymore, JP." (Bill Clinton voice) Get the impersonation right and you'll probably coerce a mild laugh, even though it's not a particularly good joke. But I remember thinking even then, before I'd ever made anyone laugh myself, that the problem lay in Clinton's response, that, instead of saying anything at all, a silent facial expression, a mixture of shame and pride, embarrassment and hubris, should linger on his face, the rest of the scene wordless, allowing an audience to slowly stretch into the implication together, to become the necessary acknowledgement that gives the joke its resolution. Obviously this all depends on how good the face is.

So maybe I gave too much: the brand of confectionary, the sound of my teeth clacking together, my relationship to the laughing group behind the girl. Maybe the problem was in forcing the details, insisting on a resolving tock.

#### SEX ADVICE (unfortunate eruptions; scarring?)

A tip from schoolfriends was, when having sex, to imagine certain images or scenarios that were unappealing, in order to delay climaxing. It was also a popular theory on television, which may or may not have been where they learned it. If one grows up without siblings or particularly informative parents it's tricky to discover where peers get their information, and I was usually too proud to ask. This method, anyway, would have been particularly unhelpful to those with high sensitivity in their penises, who, in their desperation, couldn't help but ejaculate to thoughts of their brothers' feet, grandmothers' corpses, and beloved pet turtles.

#### THE PRESENT MOMENT (profound, depending on mood)

I won't belabour the topic of Jess here, in the present moment, where the storm has settled into a light rain, billions and billions of droplets hitting the ground, trees, windows and walls. If I close my eyes, or at least the one that works, the sound could be that of a



burning fire. In the present moment I seem to think the weather outside my window is of interest to you. I apologise. Maybe it's a reprieve from all the smut you've just gone through?

I'm particularly displeased with the following entry. I've seriously considered relegating it to appendix 2. I suppose you'll eventually see why I feel this way. But the two examples carry something of Emily as I knew her, as I'd like you to know her. For that reason it stays.

### ON EMILY (case study, no analysis)

Emily is the reason I have a dog. 'Adopted,' is the term used at dog shelters. Jess had kicked me out at this point, replacing me with her work colleague. Forgive me for brushing past this but, honestly, it's the really boring modern clichéd break-up that you can find in any other novel or TV soap, and I don't have any interesting observations to offer, aside from that, while it's a relief to end an unhappy relationship, one is struck at how a sense of meaning seems inextricably tied to caring for somebody other than oneself. Or, how about this: is the main aim of the adulterer, ultimately, to commit adultery or not to get caught committing it?

So I was able to do a lot of things that living with Jess had prevented, dog adoption being one of them.

If you ever want a bad time, go to an animal shelter. Walk down the crimped alleys flanked with uniform cages where lost causes break their barks at you and smear their shit all over the floor. Pause to see the default fear and shame and trembling your mere presence brings on. Am I being a bit much?

But this is about Emily, and here's what she does: she stops half way down the first row and kneels at a cage. I can't take any more, she says. She says this with her eyes and mouth, not with words. She means it physically: whatever device we have, whatever compressor that prevents us from being overwhelmed by our empathy, Emily had a kind of amplifier. She stopped at the cage of a brindle mutt who now cowers every time I come near.

### IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (the third person, a misunderstood proposition)

There are several reasons I ask Jazz to come to church with me. One is that I know he can drive. By this time it's dark outside. In the darkness my agoraphobia is most severe (especially since my ignominy). It was once a sort of mild discomfort being outside,

with my terrible night vision, but it's developed into something much more debilitating. If I'm reading Freud correctly, my problem stems from the guilt of wanting to have sex with my mother. I think I'm from the generation after the one that was big on Freud, so you can imagine my shock. His opinion, if I'm reading correctly, is that the agoraphobic tends to process wide open spaces less as sensory information than as metaphor: limitless possibility—in the darkness. Which doesn't seem a good thing, as, if I'm reading correctly, it evokes our guiltiest memory, that of Oedipal desire. So the phobia is your mind guarding against itself, blocking the shame of the memory by transmitting panic, insisting you get indoors and away from problematic metaphors. My body has been working against me in various ways for quite a while, so it's disappointing to know my mind is also doing its own thing. Still, I can understand it: a frequent sleeping experience I have is the feeling of wanting to urinate whilst dreaming of running around labyrinthine office buildings or shopping malls full of people only to find every public toilet out of order. Another little bit of my mind preventing the guilt of wetting the bed. How interesting.

- Complication 1: sometimes there is an unoccupied disabled toilet in the dreams.
- Complication 2: I was very jealous when I could hear my mother making love to one of my uncles in the next room.

Nah, mate: Jazz is Muslim, said Jazz. I didn't get into the first reason with him, which I think might have made him lose respect for me. Instead I explained the other reason: that it was a matter of urgency that we confront a Catholic priest.

## BILL EIGHT

It is difficult for Bill to get out of bed. A heavy, sodden sponge has grown between his brain and the inside of his skull. When he stands he has to concentrate not to topple over. His legs are weak, his arms sore, a swelling nausea spreads out from his stomach and into his chest.

At the bathroom sink he splashes water on his face and feels the sharp little bristles on his cheeks, the sore lump of a new spot he checks in the cabinet mirror, not yet red, a thin blonde hair growing through its centre. The lines either side of his nose have deepened since he last looked. There are white splatters of dried toothpaste covering the faucet.

Everything smells like old food and damp towels. He struggles to unhinge the bathroom window until it abruptly juts, cool air rushing in. The day has finally woken up. How long did he sleep? Steam from one of the cooling towers in the distance wisps gently, clings to a cloud like a tendril. A strong gust carries the noises of children in a school playground. It sounds like a massacre.

He is looking at a mirror, not himself. He thinks this is important but is unsure why. He is looking at a former version. He loses the thread of thought as he remembers the medicine sitting on the shelf behind the mirror, behind his face. He opens the cabinet and looks at the small dark-brown bottles, some older than others, some there to counter what others did. He closes it again.

Bill wants a number two but he is scared. Ever since Emily, he has not gone for a number two. How long has it been? He sits on the toilet but the thought of the pain is unbearable, as if he might be split in half. His left eye begins to twitch. He stands and walks to the stairs to retrieve his clothes. They have dried stiffly and scratch as he dresses.

There is a syncopated series of claps at his letter box, the scrape of its rusty weight. The dog bounds towards the front door and Bill hears her claws click and scratch as they fail to grip the floorboards. The noises emphasise the silence they interrupted.

The door is still ajar from when Bill picked it open. The old detective is smoking and looking through the gap at the dog. His eyes are stained yellow and red. He lets the burnt filter of a cigarette drop onto the doorstep amid the remnants of the hanging basket, flattening the tiny ember with his shoe. This takes less time than it might seem. Bill realises the old detective is waiting for him to speak, or at least open the door fully. He does neither. The dog is barking louder and louder, at her own excitement. The old

detective stays silent. Bill looks down at the litter of envelopes and flyers that are wedging the door tight, considers pulling at them but decides not to. He thinks of feigning fainting, and as he does his knees weaken and buckle. His bottom lands awkwardly on the edge of one stair step and he slips down to the next. He begins to wretch but nothing comes up.

In the kitchen the detective finds a glass and pours Bill some water. He says

- You'll need this

and gives the glass to Bill. Their hands touch briefly, and the coarseness of the detective's fingers reveals to Bill the softness of his own. The water is tepid and has a tiny metallic flake swirling around, but Bill takes a small sip anyway and realises that his fly is undone.

The old detective pulls a chair from under the table and drops onto it his entire weight without hesitation. He begins to tell Bill that he's

- sorry, these conversations are always difficult. The coroner has decided on an inquest, which means Emily's body will not be released immediately. This is quite normal under the circumstances, but I know it can be a difficult process for the bereaved.

Bill remains silent. The detective waits, and then tells him that

- Her sister has also been informed. I believe you were acquainted with both sisters?

Bill wonders about the word *acquainted*. He nods slowly.

- This isn't an interrogation. Nobody thinks anyone other than Emily was involved in what happened. It's just important that you're aware of the delays. There may be an autopsy, some tests and expert opinions. But am I right that you had some sort of involvement with Emily after you were separated from her sister [...] Jessica?

From outside, above, Bill hears an accusatory helicopter drone. He hopes the detective will smile, will break into laughter at the chances, but he does not. Bill nods.

- How long were you married to Jessica?

Bill shrugs. No. Bill tells the old detective the number in years and months but not days, although he knows them. He knows the hours, too, and if he could crook his neck around the kitchen door to see the ticking grandfather clock he could tell the old detective the minutes and maybe even the seconds, depending on the condition of the sparrow's leg. There is an urge to say more. But why is the detective sharing this information with him? Bill stays quiet.

- And you divorced when?

Bill tells the detective they are not divorced. Bill stands and does a little dance, a leprechaun jig, a wry smile and wink. No. No! Bill tells the detective they are not divorced yet, just enough or perhaps too much emphasis on *yet*. The detective's eyes narrow, either in surprise or doubt, then his face changes slightly again, eyes narrowing further and his mouth faintly grimacing as if concentrating. The detective has just realised that, if still married, Bill is counting the days, readjusting the numbers. Bill acknowledges this might be perceived as strange by sitting silently and sweating. He hopes the old detective likes him but thinks he probably doesn't.

- I see. When did you separate?

Bill stands on the table and takes up the pose of Jesus on the cross. He dances again. He seems to know some elements of the Jitterbug. And the Charleston. B... he, shhhhhh. The detective gets up from the chair. Bill pulls a knife from the drawer, *his drawers*, and... NO! Bill faints. Okay? Bill faints again. He's on the floor unconscious. He tries to get up. But no. He faints. Bill faints and the old detective turns him onto his side, into the recovery position. He has to press Bill down. Bill twitches, resists, and then begins to calm and still. The old detective covers him in a big coat, ruffles his hair, and gives the dog some food and water. He tears a piece of paper from his notepad and writes down a telephone number, leaves it on the kitchen counter weighted with the glass still full of water, the metal flake still floating, and walks out of the house.

## Notes on the Text

### BOB HAWK SAYS ("seeing yourself, looking back, is a trip")

"There comes a moment in any story when you need to take your guy to the mirror. 'A man's face is his autobiography' – Oscar Wilde. 'A man's face is his fate' – Bob Hawk."  
DAWW, xi

### STORYTELLING (unreliable characters, art of fiction)

By the end there I wanted the old detective to take the knife and stab the little shit in the leg. Bill's going to fight me all the way. And the old detective is a total failure. Why is his tone so polite? Do I really have to write out an entire tragic back story for him to be more like the detectives we all know and love? Something has to be done.

The problem with Bill: I was trying to get him to confess. To what I'm not certain, but to at least get on his knees and show a willingness to accept guilt, repent. It would be good for him.

My first confession took place inside one of the old wooden confessionals seen in countless films. It smelled like the yellowed pages of old books, mixed with the slightest hint of wood polish and lavender. There was a smooth waxiness to every surface – accumulation of polish over the years – and it creaked at the slightest touch. Almost black wood; green padded knee rest; a grille between confessor and priest patterned with tiny crosses: everything ornate and inefficient. Of course, the grille only gave the pretence of anonymity: everyone knew Father Gilday was on the other side, his rubbery Irish face like a holy jigsaw. And Father Gilday would remember you, too, after a few visits—your performance as a penitent, tone, style, content, etc. I never turned up for my confirmation classes, but he knew me for a while for my weekly visit, my mother's life and legacy, and the funeral he performed for her a few years later (you're thinking here "what about the whole thing with St Peter's Gospel and him in just his underpants?" That was the year before mum died, when she was most keen for me to get the altar boy gig. The truth is Gilday and I had both silently agreed that it never happened – a little like the Catholic Church and some of St Peter's ideas – and went on accordingly). When he brought me into his sterile presbytery to pick the hymns for mum's service – selecting them himself from his worn leather hymnal whilst I quietly nodded – he didn't associate me with the weird little Eddie Wessex who used to wait his turn in the pew every Saturday morning.

I didn't think about God when I confessed, I thought about the priest. I wanted his forgiveness, his recognition that my life was a struggle. All I needed was to know somebody understood. And I didn't think to talk about my actual life: I made up mild sins: stealing sweets, blasphemy, missing mass. Nothing mortal, the common weaknesses I was sure wouldn't make Father Gilday think too little of me. I wish I could explain to Bill how good he'd feel if he knelt and repented, for anything. He just won't stay still.

STORYTELLING (more shitty writing, Ariadne's wrong turns)

A strong gust carries? Sounds like a massacre? Losing the thread? Actually, the thread we can keep. The rest, I have to say—it's almost like the clichés keep Bill calm. If I veer away he seems to resist. But I like the thread. To recognise the thread is to acknowledge it's been lost. Just because something feels close doesn't make it so. Just because something was once held doesn't mean you can hold it again.

DOG DAYS (suddenly something to say about the family unit)

Okay, Bill gets a dog because I have one. Easy for me, and it segues into the story about Emily at the animal shelter, which I realise sounds a bit overdone if you don't have a clear picture of her face in your mind. All I have to do is add 'and the dog barked' once or twice. It's all so transparent.

But maybe I have something to say about this. Considering we think ourselves superior to animals, it's curious that we depend on a parental carer of some sort for significantly longer than any other species. Compare a one year-old child to a one year old dog. Compare a *ten* year-old child to a one year old dog! Caring for a dog is difficult but if you fail to feed it, say, it will eventually eat you alive. Or at least try. I'm pretty sure my dog has a plan b, put it that way. Kill everything on the planet apart from six year-old humans and a few dogs and see what you get. It makes me wonder how we managed.

ON EMILY AND JESS (dealing with the dying, the other parent)

Jess and Emily were always reluctant to speak of each other, Jess writing her little sister off, Emily finding her big sister incalculably cruel. So it was recollections mostly, of their parents and upbringing, I had to compare. Their mother was deeply divisive and

therefore less interesting, as polarities tend to be. She was the reason Jess and Emily stopped speaking, or that's what I inferred—each draped her estrangement in a kind of melodramatic elusiveness. Their father was more subtle. It was clear from both that he was a stern and quiet man, tucked tightly inside his own failures and regrets; an intelligent underachiever, whatever charm he once possessed diluted by his wife's vivacity, the apparent affairs with her students.

To hear from them about their father's last months is as good an indication of their differences as I can give. Both told how he began frequently mistaking each of them for their dead mother; how at first he angrily denied he'd slipped, and then, towards the end, angrily objected to their corrections. The only difference between the two recollections was that Jess underlaid the information with defiance, that the confused man was not her father but an illness contained in a familiar shell. Emily told it rheumy-eyed, smiling, whispering it like a fairy tale.

One daughter despised her mother, the other wanted to be her. Conclude what you will about what each position meant in relation to their father.

#### MOTHERS AND FATHERS (burning in hell, common fantasies)

My own mother was fond of telling me that I'd burn to death for my sins. They've relaxed the hellfire stuff in the church these days but that's the brand I grew up with. I didn't think much of it, and, aside from weeping on my knees in the blackness of bedroom prayer every night, begging god to help me be good, I dealt with it fairly robustly. I did tend, for a while, to pass on my mother's message enthusiastically to children at school. Once that was beaten out of me I managed to make a few friends. They didn't last long after their first trip to my house.

I'll resist the misery memoir. Let's just say while young boys inevitably see their friends' mothers as sexual possibilities (my mother was physically a very attractive woman, no doubt, which reminds me that I've really not said enough about what people in this story look like at all. I'll make a point of going back and adding something about that, as it's probably quite important), not many get to see them as sexual certainties.

#### BILL & I (the nature of the hunt, gaps that can't be filled)

Once more, having too much to say makes it difficult to say anything at all. And, once more, I look from my window, where one might see a blue tit alighting on a tree branch,



its fat little body and urgent eyes, its specific schedule that has no time for pondering. It's easy to PONDER (from Latin *pondus* 'weight' – everything seems to also be 'weight'). When he departs, for reasons obscure to you but not to him, you stay locked on the branch, which is bare and wobbles with the memory of his take-off, the loss. A fat wood pigeon may land, if one continues to look, and the branch might bend dramatically, so quickly the pigeon must struggle immediately away. That's almost certainly a good metaphor for something, but not for Bill. His reasons are certainly obscure but, I think, to him as well. There's a void where personality should be, some dark things I can't figure out. His time in front of the computer is not what I intended. His behaviour with the old detective scares me. He's volatile and dangerous, and it's all I can do to keep him contained. He's not what I thought he was. Unwritten, he didn't stray. He didn't resist.

It's time to come clean: the little boy who rushed joyfully towards me all those years ago, energised by the power of knowledge, backlit by the smoulder, the glowing embers of my childhood home (this is all very Blessed, and please permit me the embers thing right now, even if it's implausible), well, he became a priest.

#### CONFESSION (truth and storytelling)

It really was the sound of church bells carried on the wind that led me back to mass. Indeed, the mechanical sort, which, as I said, are stilted and sound like a competent but hesitant amateur. But the moment I saw Father Drummond's face I knew—he'd been my Bill for so long I wobbled at the sight, leaned on an old woman in the pew who almost folded under my weight. He who told me my mum had burnded, a little taller and broader, now robed, flanked by robed young boys, walking to the altar. My Bill had grown up, gained form. The child who had become my emotional proxy was now god's proxy. He clearly enjoyed the taste of passing on life-changing information.

If I was a better writer I'd present this differently, I suppose. I saw this in the Checkhardt: 'DENOUEMENT: an "unknotting" (F) of events or complications of an intricate plot, often as a resolution. When the action closes the protagonist has learned his lessons. There is rest.' The end would be a stand-off between Drummond and me, one on one, where the revelation would take place. Maybe we'd be on a bridge. No, we'd be standing on the altar. We'd each be holding a crucifix as a sword and, well, much of this last bit actually happened, with Jazz in attendance. I'll go through it in more detail later. But something isn't right, is there, about this unknotting? Not that it doesn't happen – things unknot all the time, unravel or reveal themselves – but they never

happen at the end of a life like the end of a story, more at unexpected times within somebody's story, with more than enough time to tangle back up again.

The point is that Bill was for so long a part of my imagination, a rogue agent, an experiential conduit—maybe none of those things, exactly, but something similar—it was odd to see the real Bill again. This, coupled with my ignominy, led to a funny time in my life.

REPORT ON TAXI DRIVER REACTION TO MIDNIGHT DROP-OFF (stupid handsome heroes)

Time: 12:11

State: Mostly sober, a little high

Company: AAA Taxi

Driver: Male, early 20s, Middle Eastern, handsome and confident.

Car: Black BMW, about ten years old

Conversation: Location queried. Reasons queried (query response: "it's just where I'd like to go"). Response accepted.

Polite talk about news item mentioned on radio

Duration: 18 minutes x2

Fare: £7.40 x2

Reaction: A look, in the eyes, of genuine concern as fare is handed over. Car crawls away slowly, stops and waits several metres down the road. Does not leave. Driver takes subject back home.

Result: Smug bugger thinks he saved my life

## BILL NINE

Bill is not on his kitchen floor, covered in an old jacket. He is not upstairs, in bed. He is not with the dog that is whining and pawing at the living room window, certain she will starve. Nor is he sat on the front door step with the remnants of hanging basket and the smouldering cigarette stub. The alleyway that leads to his house, the road it reaches, are both empty. The minimarket is closed. The path through the copse is silent, the canal moorings vacant of boats. The water still, ducks asleep. And he is not at the top of the road where he once saw his city rousing.

Where is Bill? At the summit, the old detective observes the same city panorama as did Bill when he left the station. It moves, works like an organism, everything interdependent. Or it's like a woman who's been places. He looks, or squints, to the source of the canal, the river basin, then follows the river itself—from man-made to earth-made. It snakes back around the city, shaping it. It is the memory of the city, thinks the old detective: its cartographer, planner and anchor. He sees the lonely laundrette, skirt tucked and billowing from her underwear, plunging and wringing. He sees a cotton boat. He sees shipbuilders come, shipbuilders go; and tourists, pouring onto boats and into museums. A floating, decapitated sheep, somehow, and a film of scum tickling the nitrogen-bloated algae. A lone seabird inland, gliding on the breeze, searching. The old detective sucks on his cigarette and remembers something or other.

A morning rain is falling, the soft, sleepy kind. There are protests in the city today, but the old detective has never concerned himself with politics, only right and wrong, even if it was never that simple. He sucks again on his cigarette, which crackles and burns orange, and thinks about the weird kid, Bill. Where could he be? He's seen too many like Bill. He doesn't want to have to talk another one down from the side of a bridge, see another one drop.

He has a file, of course, all the information on Bill. Not on his person, for the old detective carries no load, but there is a file and he has seen it. He sucks, exhales. Squints. He turns, walks down the inclining road which forks like a serpent's tongue. He approaches the abandoned school.

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Bill is awake. He is both indoors and out, inside walls but still feeling the soft grey rain patter and drip. A tree branch has grown through the paneless window. Bill wonders if it is still a window, or now just a hole. Bulging white droplets of rainwater dangle from

the underside of the branch, and it calms Bill to think of each one forming, landing and slowly descending, gathering into itself until being stuck fast by its own weight, hanging pregnant before dropping. One does just that, bursting on his forehead, never to be recreated.

All night there were stirrings outside, noises that sounded to Bill like other people who belonged there more than him, like the ducks at the canal, or that belonged there enough to make him unwelcome. In the light the same noises feel less hostile, less like humans, and Bill feels less like a trespasser.

He is underneath a school desk, the heavy wooden kind with a flap lid, room inside for schoolchildren to keep their books and stationary and to scrawl their names or favourite words, although the flap itself is missing, as is the desk bottom. He sees it once belonged to Alice, and also to Claire. Alice was neater, more methodical in her signature, unless Claire was simply more obedient, rushed because she was afraid of being caught. There was no way of knowing. Maybe Alice had a lot more time, the teacher having left the room with an unruly boy, or two boys who had been fighting, pulling each by their already stretched-out jumper sleeves, one in each hand, the boys red faced, one crying and one laughing, easy to tell which will succeed in life, and Alice, who has always been unfazed by events, waits for the classroom door to catch before steadily stroking first the straight lines at the beginning of her name then the smooth curves at the end, while Claire, in the following year's class, rushes her name alongside Alice's, understanding it as a kind of stab at immortality, but is caught by the same teacher, who, a year older, jaded from so many years of taking fighting boys from the classroom, standing them against the cold white wall outside, wagging her finger in each of their almost identically soft and undeveloped faces, telling them that they were very bad boys, whilst knowing all the while that she is essentially powerless and that some little boys are already lost causes, snaps at Claire and calls her a stupid, naughty little girl, which would explain why her 'e' is so indistinct and trails off at the end like an aeroplane contrail. Bill thinks all this very quickly, all the while remembering how it is impossible to know for sure.

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The old detective walks across the parquet floor, most of the sections, see-sawing beneath the weight of his step. He sees Bill balled up on himself, rocking or shaking, underneath an old broken school desk. The old detective doesn't think Bill will stick him, but one never knows. It doesn't pay to make assumptions in these situations, most

certainly in *any* situation it is better to make no assumptions whatsoever, unless it's a hunch. He carries on, stepping more heavily.

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Bill hears the slow splashing of dripping water, coming closer? More of a thump. He thinks of Emily. No, he thinks of his audience. He presses the mic close to his lips, closes his eyes. Have they heard the one about the something or other? No! They laugh, they all laugh ever so much. He tells it again, they still haven't heard it. And again, this time in a different accent. Alice and Claire, all grown up, are sat in the front row. Beautiful smiles. Grace, too, with a big purple eye and a missing tooth, and Jess and Emily. They're all so happy for him. "Tell it again," they scream in delight. He does.

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The kid's clutching onto something. Maybe he *will* try to stick me, the old detective thinks. But... no, is he? Brushing his teeth? The old detective bends down and puts his hand on Bill's shoulder. Bill tries to stick him with the toothbrush. They struggle briefly. The kid's all bones and the old detective eases him onto the classroom floor. He smells pretty bad, like cheese but also shit. The old detective has smelt worse, much worse, but he doesn't like to think of it.

The old detective is as gentle as he can be as he fends off Bill's attack, guides him face down onto the floor, settles each of his knees into the back of Bill's, presses on each elbow. The kid is so brittle and light, like an old person or a meringue, and he feels hardly there at all until he tries to speak. It is more of a squawk of defiance, sad and frail, and the old detective immediately wishes Bill really had been brushing his teeth, as the warm brown smell of rot thickens the air between them.

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The crowd storms the stage. Bill thrusts the mic upwards and thinks for a moment about the Statue of Liberty. Grace is so excited one of her red nails scratches his face. She says

- I'm so sorry baby it's okay it's only a scratch you're doing so well everybody loves you

whilst still grinding her groin against his hip. Emily is smiling beautifully. Jess seems fine.

He's so tired. He lies down on his stomach so nobody can play with his penis while he sleeps.

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The old detective feels bad about the kid's cheek. It'll scar, he thinks. Looks like he caught it on the hinge of the old desk. It was a little weird the way he jumped up out of there, flapping open an imaginary lid. Even for the old detective, a little weird. If the old detective ever laughed, he might have laughed at this, thinks the old detective.

The old detective closes Bill's hands behind his back in prayer. His grip fits entirely around both the kid's wrists, shackles them together with a kerchief from his pocket, for the kid's own safety more than his own.

## Notes on the Text

### PEOPLE WHO'VE GONE MISSING (no new characters, small surprises)

#### **Main Uncle**

Curious thing about Main Uncle's love of American professional wrestling: he had a penchant for middling heels – 'Beautiful' Bobby Eaton, Larry Zybyszko, Tom 'Z Man' Zenk (you can imagine Larry Zybyszko's slight annoyance at the younger Zenk thinking of the nickname first, even if Zybyszko was a ring name itself, of course) whenever Tom Zenk was a heel – the most uninspiring of the regular WCW roster. He sat in his work boots, glanced around the newspaper, smoked on the doorstep – one foot inside the other out – and only ever drank outside the house (mum was never allowed to drink outside in the time he knew her). He once bought me a train set for no special occasion and sold it a week later—a man of complications. He once, only ever once, wore a pair of shorts and asked us – mum and I – if his legs were too skinny. I immediately said no—I'd actually silently admired his shapely calves. Okay, he said, in a tone that implied I'd said hey nice penis. He always carried on him the scent of a smoker coming indoors out of the rain, which is what he always was. His paucity of speech required supplemental physical demonstration to communicate ideas, and only then did I see that much of his speech was purely physical instruction.

Have I summed him up? Almost—he was there on D-day on his nineteenth birthday (he was two decades older than mum) storming the beaches. Or so he said. He'd talk - his only drunken reminiscence, at least in my presence - about the sniper that took out his friend two feet away. He'd imagine the sniper going along the line through his sight, arbitrarily choosing which greenish dome to hit. It's sad that an assemblage of fragmented memories can be all that's left of a person, before there's nothing left at all. Or maybe it isn't sad. Still, it's easy to see why so many people want to be famous.

But main uncle didn't seek fame. Quite the opposite—he sought the crevices of life, as if it was something to be endured. At least it seemed that way to me. Of course, he ended up being sodomised with a broom handle—either that or he fell on scaffolding. He attained a fame he didn't seek, or at least an infamy, not too dissimilar to my ignominy. And he went missing soon after.

#### **Drummond, Father**

I realise I have a more work to do if anyone is to make sense of why I'm sat, in the following entry, with a volatile drug dealer outside Father Drummond's living quarters planning an act of violence. Here are a few things worth considering:

1. There is no plan. Or at least the only planned out part was my suggestion to Jazz that we confront a priest, knowing he was the type who took any suggestion as a kind of challenge to his machismo.
2. There was never any serious intention to hurt Drummond. Unbeknownst to Jazz I was in the midst of an improvisation.
3. Despite (2.), the irresolution I've felt since Drummond gleefully informed me of my mother's death has maybe nagged a bit, maybe affected me a bit.
4. Because of (3.), I suppose I've always felt that I needed some sort of confrontation with Drummond, lest I be constantly imagining my life as if lived by Drummond (aka Bill), replaying my real life experiences with him as protagonist, which as you can imagine makes it difficult to get things done.
5. Due to (4. In3-4), I'm not really sure how I feel about anything.

I don't know if this helps. Either way, Drummond went missing, too. At some point he became Bill, who tried to hide and maybe was successful (see above). While he was Bill he was also, I suppose, an actual body somewhere, somehow finding god, attending seminary, working hard at his faith, turning it into fact, getting even more confused about erections than I. There's a chance he wasn't the chap who sniffed cocaine with me in the toilets that time, or more accurately laughed at my inability to sniff cocaine. It seems unlikely when I think about it, but a lot of those old school-time faces have blurred into one another in my memory. Anyway, he went missing for a long time and then he came back. There's no point pretending it's not a significant opportunity.

### **Emily**

For three days before we found her, Emily was missing. Not lost, not disappeared, but missing in our imaginations. Three days impossible to know completely, although some small things can be gleaned from details. On the first day, she smashed her mobile phone with a rolling pin, leaving the utensil and the remains next to each other on her kitchen counter. That day I was rewriting a monologue about accidentally fingering a girl in the anus and her being too polite to say I'd found the wrong hole. The problem with the joke, I knew, was that the politeness only worked if it was from my perspective, but the logistics of switching the physical act were proving difficult. On this day I called Emily, planning to hang up when she answered. The phone rang until an automated voicemail message was engaged. We know at some point between 12:30-1:00pm she went to a local shop and purchased a small plastic pot of fruit in syrup. She still exists on CCTV footage in jumpy black and white animation outside the shop, at least until the recording is deleted.



On the second day, if not on the first, she smashed her phone with a rolling pin and left the two things side by side on the kitchen top. Or she smashed her phone with something else and left it next to a rolling pin. I'd discarded my monologue by then and was feeling down. That evening I got drunk and considered sending her a photograph of my erect penis, an idea aborted after several failed attempts at sustaining anything that looked impressive. There's no definite evidence of what she did that evening, but earlier that day she bought a roll of black masking tape and a set of new blades for a utility knife from an art supply shop. She also bought another small pot of fruit in syrup. The frigid, unsociable lady who owns the old fashioned newsagents said Emily chose one of the pots from the freezer, despite the early-Spring chill. Later that night Emily did as much as she could to erase her image—scraped her face from every family photograph with one of the blades bought earlier, deleted her email account, removed the hard drive from her computer and left it in a bathtub full of water. At some point she would've remembered the images she didn't possess, owned by others, over which she had no control.

On the third day Emily woke early and went for a walk with her dog. A fellow neighbour dog walker remembered being surprised to see her out so early. He said hello and she said it back, the two dogs registered each other with sniffs. He mentioned that she smiled and stroked his dog under the chin. This was around 6:45am. At 8:45am (two hours forever lost) she returned home, bumping into an upstairs neighbour who was late for work. This neighbour, a woman called Theresa who may have been Spanish, was particularly upset with herself for failing to stop and chat. She said this in the hallway several days after Emily was found. She wasn't too upset to apply make-up that day, some of which had fallen from her lashes and caught on the frail bagged skin under her eyes as she held our hands, mine and Jess's, and told us she, Emily, was at peace now, or in a better place. It seemed an odd contradiction of beliefs, since she knew the nature of the death. I wasn't awake when the dog walker saw Emily, nor when Spanish Theresa rushed past her with no acknowledgement, or hardly any acknowledgement, maybe a brief hello or hi, or maybe she forgot herself and said *hola* or *buenos días* with a lifeless, thoughtless automacy, Emily's existence failing to irrupt into Theresa's already hectic consciousness. During both of those exchanges – and the forever unknowable hours in between – I was in bed with a piss-filled numb erection, dreaming of out-of-order public toilets, drifting between wake and sleep, half aware of the beginnings of a terrible hangover. When I woke and checked my phone I began to worry. A missed call from Emily's number. This was very odd for all sorts of reasons, although at the same time not unexpected. I waited for a few hours, feeling hung over yet still a little drunk, quite nervous, before taking the bus to her flat. I buzzed at the

entrance and then, when the dog walking man exited the building, entered and knocked on her front door. Around this time she might have been placing her broken mobile phone next to the rolling pin or pouring water over her hard drive or scraping her face from the few photographs she had – which seems more and more like an anachronistic act, soon to be archaic and difficult to even contextualise – listening to my buzzes and knocks. She may have been twisting thick layers of masking tape around the brass light fitting or removing the extension cord from behind the TV cabinet. Or she may have been hanging, hearing my buzzes and knocks but unable to release herself, or maybe just hearing the buzzes, too late for the knocks. Or she might have been doing something else, like writing her note, perhaps. There's a moment in the note one could argue is a kind of pause where maybe the author was distracted for a moment, a partially unfinished thought, an unnatural shift into a different topic. But nobody can say the note hadn't been written days or weeks earlier. Her dog didn't bark when I knocked but rather whined, and through the compressed wood of her door I could hear the hollow boom of its tail wagging against a wall.

Strange coincidence: on the very same day Emily went missing (the day before, February 29<sup>th</sup>, a leap day – the day Japan finished building the tallest tower in the world according to an internet search I conducted in an attempt to find symmetry or, you know, a metaphor that would make sense – she'd answered her phone to me, the same tentative 'hello' as always, repeated twice more with identical second-syllable modulation—lilting *oh* both in question and resignation. She'd stopped asking 'who is this?') an English soap opera actress was also reported missing in the national news and social media. Over the following week parts of her were dredged from a canal. She'd been murdered and dismembered by her own brother. It's impossible to untwine the two events in my mind. One evokes the other, each flicker of association (and this could be anything: an oval eggshell reminding me of the outline of Emily's face; an abrupt thumping sound similar to the soap opera's distinctive drumbeat opening credits) ignites a series of connected fuses, a chain of dynamite like a long link of sausages wrapped around both women as if they were the distressed damsels from a *Looney Tunes* cartoon, although neither to be rescued nor obliterated, just tied back to back, screaming, Emily's blonde hair and the actress's black hair lashing across both faces. Maybe that's a bit much, or, well, I see that I kind of muddled metaphors there—forget the sausages. But I can't be the only person whose mind creates an image to resolve the irresolvable, I'm sure.

THE PRESENT MOMENT (the presentest of moments)

This is the most present of my moments, or at least the closest moment here to the present—the closest we'll be to each other. In terms of timeline, this moment, for clarity, is three days after the previous present moment. I met with Jess (see appendix 1, Int2 pt1&2) and our conversation encouraged me to come back to these specific pages and make a few small adjustments: minor things, really, and when you get to appendix 1 you'll probably notice where the changes have been made. I'm not in quite as good a mood as a few days ago, unfortunately. Again, when you get to appendix 1 you'll see some of the issues that have recently come up and the additional stuff I'm being forced to include. Everybody's a fucking critic, apparently. Plus I'm still lying face down, which isn't ideal. Anyway, I've chosen to pop in here one final time to let you know that there are a few bits coming up that I've had to add to the original text (they're actually almost as present as this moment right now—about thirty minutes less present to be exact). As a heads up I can tell you they're the entries related to a few accusations of 'monster' that have recently been bandied about (again, see appendix 1). I don't consider them particularly necessary, but there you go. Don't worry, the big action finale's coming up over the next few pages, too, so there's that to look forward to.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (sufferers, linear time, necessary distractions)

My last birthday made me a year older than my mother's age when she passed (I always assumed 'passed' was short for 'passed away,' which it is, but also for 'passed on,' at least for the faithful. I heard it a lot at my mother's funeral—that she had 'passed on,' i.e. gone to another place, i.e. heaven—the same woman who had multiple lovers, threw rocks at children who played too close to her kitchen window, ended or began the majority of her sentences with 'Jesus Fucking Christ,' and, I think, could technically be considered a prostitute (Jess once told me that I think every woman is technically a prostitute, but it's really only the women I spend a lot of time with). 'She's passed on to a better place, love,' they said with the hope I wouldn't reply. Even Catholics, at the end of a life, consider the mortal sins more as suggestions, re-write god as a jolly sort of Santa figure kicking it at the gate with Pete, wry smile and ironic wagging finger as the fornicating blasphemer waddles up, head bowed) and I realise I've accrued absolutely no wisdom in my life. I never have a clue how a thing might play out, even a simple thing like attempting to take cake from a dog (I note the similarity to a well-known phrase, but my example is more autobiographical—let's not get into the specifics right now). Or telling a joke: on stage, fine; off-stage, where most of life is acted out, my

hit/miss ratio is unspectacular, or spectacular, depending. So you can imagine my ambivalence as Jazz and I pulled up outside Drummond's.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (evolution of architecture as analogous to something or other)

Like St Charles church itself, the annexed presbytery where Drummond lives is one of those modern buildings with sharp 70s angles, low-built like a primary school, unimposing and ugly in a sort of minor way. Unimposing but not unthreatening—I've never quite understood the thinking behind those sharp jutting triangles that coincided with the decade of my birth. Not that I think it had anything to do with my birth, necessarily. It's unlikely anyone could find them attractive, but, at the same time, they almost feel like a final sigh of effort from architecture. New buildings now seem concentrated on not being noticed, slightly ashamed of their parents. My taste has always been for Georgian townhouses—the big bright windows and high ceilings, tasteful cornicing and many levels on which generations of families can live. They were always the houses closed and inaccessible to me as a child, thusly providing fondly imagined memories today.

I'm slipping from my topic. We're outside the presbytery, Jazz and I, and we can see Drummond walking back and forth in front of his window, possibly preparing to bless holy water although who knows? Are you excited about the present tense shift? Don't be. We sat outside for an hour or so, barely talking. Drummond continued to potter about inside while I deliberated. The Cowboy's the silent type, said Jazz. I forgot to mention that earlier in the evening, as we were leaving, Jazz took to calling me 'The Cowboy,' on account of the leather tassels I have on the arms of my favourite jacket. Jazz was minimalist. I was tempted to ask his advice, but what's the point if you're unsure of your desired outcome?

Maybe it was two hours. Whenever precisely Drummond flicked off the lights in his living room I decided to close my eyes and count to one hundred. The Cowboy's Zen, said Jazz. I detected the slightest respect. On ninety-nine I jumped out of the car and walked to Drummond's. Jazz followed. I banged at the door with my fist. Jazz did the same, only harder, clearly now enthusiastic, although only willing to play the role of imitator. The lights came back on after a pause, the sounds behind the door not even slightly anxious.

Forgive me for cutting off from the action for a little while. We'll get back to this, I promise. There are just one or two other contextual things I have to mention.

ANIMALS (one of many examples I could provide, naming no names)

Someone recently linked some footage on wrestlenow.net, a British hostage in the Middle East getting his head cut off by a masked man with a kind of dagger. It was quick, considering the surprisingly small size of the knife. I always assumed some sort of large sword or even guillotine would be involved, although the little dagger was incredibly efficient. The man screamed at first, then began to squeal. After it was done, the executioner placed the detached head on top of the victim's back. It was the most intimate thing I've ever witnessed, and the cruellest. It's a very famous video although apparently not easy to find, which makes me worry a little about how easily I found it and who might be tracking me as a result. I only mention it so I can note the sadness I felt afterwards, which I think proves I'm not devoid of empathy.

The listed viewer comments below the video were either banally sorrowful or flamboyantly violent. I wondered why either set bothered, why they felt the compulsion to publicise their opinions. Then I wondered if what I am doing here was any different.

CONFESSION (some thoughts on being a killer)

I'm aware I didn't linger on my confession of killing that boy outside the tanning salon. I think I was partly swept along by my own story. But I know I should say more: I can't expect you to forget you're reading the thoughts of a killer.

I don't like the word 'murderer,' which, by definition, implies guilt. And that's because I don't like the word 'guilt'. Don't think I didn't repent. When one kills, everything before is erased and anything that follows is rejected. One becomes nothing but the noun, if one wishes to refer to oneself as one. Or, rather, you become the *guilt*—the possession of guilt is all you can contain, and it sits heavily in your stomach, your centre, but reaches out to the tips of your fingers and toes. I can't help thinking of a kangaroo with a dead joey in her pouch but I acknowledge it's not a very good metaphor (don't worry, I checked the Checkhardt to make sure what FORESHADOWING is—none of that here). For a while, anyway, it's the guilt that defines you.

The problem is that I can't say I'm totally on board with guilt as an idea. Not the fact of criminal offense, which we're all stuck with as soon as we're born, but the *feeling* of guilt, which seems to me like an unhelpful euphemism for a more complicated mixture of emotions (GUILT isn't much help here: 'from Old English *gylt*, of unknown origin'—it's like someone just made it up). What if it doesn't follow that doing

something wrong results in guilt? Why should not feeling 'guilt' label you a somethingopath? Or maybe my issue is with the word 'wrong'? What if you can rationalise away the feeling of guilt because you understand it's only really the feeling of worry over being caught, being punished? And then when you know there's no prospect of punishment you actually feel a kind of joy?

I'm not suggesting the question 'Why is murder wrong?' If we begin picking apart that sort of thing certain aspects of life would be intolerable. Imagine for example supermarkets! Let's take it as a given that murder isn't a good thing. But maybe instead of 'wrong' we should say 'unsociable'? Or even 'mean,' as in 'killing someone is a mean thing to do'. Granted, the latter sounds a little childish, but I don't think that's always a bad thing. Think of all those childish words that say so much more than the adult versions, like, say, 'icky'. Find the adult word for 'icky' that manages to contain the same myriad nuance. Maybe if we are told that it's 'mean' to kill someone instead of 'wrong' we might understand our emotions a little better and those boys would never have thrown that bottle at me in the first place, which is how it all started.

Sometimes I think I was born in the wrong time period, the wrong place—either, or maybe both. Might I have flourished in, say, earlier, crueller times? Certainly I feel I would have had some salient points to share around the time language was being invented, whenever that was.

#### ADDENDUM RE. 'GUILT' (domestication and its discontents)

The example of my dog: by chance, I've realised that if I look at her, point at the floor and say 'what's this?' she cowers and trembles in a way that certainly looks like a feeling of guilt. She had a life before me, of course, so I'm not sure what started it, but she accepts her guilt immediately even when she's done nothing wrong, readies herself for whatever punishment might be given. I actually chanced upon this verbal trigger for the first time whilst holding a sodden forkful of *Burnman's Frozen Roast Pork Meal for One* up to the kitchen light (it was actually *Burnman's Frozen Toad in the Hole Meal for One*, but, even though true, sounds too much like fiction) and asking the question not to her but more generally to the world. But on-point, what looks like guilt, and is mindlessly accepted as such, is actually just a fear of punishment.

I'm not saying it's an exact fit. Just something I've noticed.

IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (searching for my super ego at the pulpit,  
fight scene)

If you expected an actual sword fight I apologise. It seemed as if Drummond would've let us in anyway, but Jazz was quick to force himself into the house, diving through Drummond's legs and grabbing him in a full nelson. He began wiggling his hips from side to side to counter the hold, as if this wasn't an uncommon experience, but Jazz's wiry grip was clasped tight.

Drummond, despite his struggling, kept eye contact. I could see he was trying to figure out who he was looking at. And I could tell the moment he realised, for, behind the grimace, I saw the recognition dilate his pupils. Most of my desire to punch him at this point was due to his pompadour, and even that began to diminish, flopping into an Elvis curl between his eyebrows. He was a handsome man. I have no idea whether he remembered me from childhood, from my recent trips to mass, or from the small picture of my blurred face that had recently appeared in several newspapers (Re. my ignominy).

Jazz did his job wonderfully, carefully guiding Drummond backwards and into a reading chair in a small kind of study. There are certain echoes of experience and habit that remain defiantly residual in the posture of a person. Jazz had spent a lot of time watching and mimicking his heroes (boxers and the gangsters of cinema), and after seating Drummond he stood aside, eyes toward the door, springing on the balls of his feet. I appreciated his positional awareness. And also his loyalty, which, despite seeming to be rooted in familiarity rather than any sensibility, made me feel brave and correct.

To the surprise of Jazz and I, Drummond stood back up immediately. It didn't occur to either of us that he wouldn't stay seated without being restrained. Sometimes you can get so caught up in your ideas you forget other people haven't been briefed on how things are supposed to work. So Drummond stands and then sort of squats a little, as if to lower his centre of gravity. It was impressive how quickly he shed the gentle manner of the priest for the more stubborn physicality of any other man, despite still wearing his dog collar. No matter how much you're aware of the artifice, uniforms are very good at creating context. I take up the same posture, bending my knees and widening my arms. Any defensive stance is also an attacking one, and displaying my greater height and width is wise, although I certainly feel quite small at this point. Fuck him, Cowboy, says Jazz.

On my person, or in my pocket, I have a corkscrew, which I'd been thinking about ever since Bob Hawk mentioned the incident with his brother. I carry a weapon around with me at night, always, I should've mentioned. For the record, I don't pull it

out to threaten Drummond. I pull it out because its spike is sticking into my thigh due to my new squatting position. It's one of those corkscrews with the long arms that you can make do amputee star jumps if you're so inclined. Before I realise the implications of wielding a weapon at a person whose home I've just broken into, I'm temporarily a kind of floating ghost looking down at a man in a room holding the flimsy legs of a cheap corkscrew like a tiny pair of garden shears. Shank the cunt, says Jazz, partially revealing his definition of the term. Two black sperm do a little dance in my eye.

Drummond lunges before I get the chance – not that I'd have taken the chance – and carries me through what seem like a series of doors that lead into the church itself, before falling on top of me. Whatever you've heard about adrenaline, a priest ramming you through several church doors before dropping you onto the thinly carpeted first step of an altar is painful in the immediate. The corkscrew is on my chest but Drummond has me by each wrist and manages to force my hands onto the floor above my head, holding them there under the weight of his left forearm. I suppose he imagines that I might shank him. He does not say "the power of Christ compels you," unfortunately. The way my body stretches forces out a kind of sigh that I've never heard before, maybe like an old person sitting down or getting up. And then we have a moment, only brief: our eyes lock in a peculiar way that brings equality to the situation: we are two adult males who happen to be belly-to-belly on the scratchy carpet of a modern Catholic church, spinning around a massive burning star. He places his right palm on my head and tells me not to worry, that everything's okay. He's persuasive even though, upon releasing his grip on my wrist to perform the gentle act, he makes sure to put a heavy elbow on my biceps to keep me immobile. He says it again: "everything's okay," quietly, kindly. I begin to feel calm, there's a kind of warm stillness in my limbs and a great ease and comfort, like stretching out on a sunny beach. So quick a change in temperament would normally cause me to panic – unexpected tranquillity is a fleeting experience – but something about Drummond's sincerity is almost hypnotic, maybe not even 'almost'. And in this moment I feel Bill disappearing, a beautiful insignificance. My mum burning in the fire, Emily hanging: these are sad things. But they are my things, not Bill's. A door in my mind, that's how it feels: the padlocks on an old steel door, the steel itself, all melts away, and my lost loves enter willingly, happily.

Take that, Jazz actually says as he kicks Drummond in the back. Jazz just booted Reverend Elvis to hell, says Jazz. Shank him, Cowboy, says Jazz.

The rest of the encounter is a little hazy. Certainly Drummond managed to reach a telephone and call the police. He also kicked me in the groin, and I can't really blame him for that. A big issue for Jazz was that he fell a little awkwardly onto the



corkscrew as I was holding it. Drummond, I think, shouldered him out of the way in his escape, causing him to trip backwards over my legs as I tried to get up, corkscrew in hand. A tiny bit went through his trousers and into his anus. It was definitely not sodomy. I've looked it up and no way did it go that far. But obviously still not something he enjoyed. It was all I could do to persuade him to let me back into the car as we made our escape. He was never, I realised, going to be the Watson to my Sherlock or the Sancho to my whatever his name was, although that wasn't entirely his fault. For me, the whole thing went okay. Not great, but okay.

REPORT ON TAXI DRIVER REACTION TO MIDNIGHT DROP-OFF (the cowboy rides alone)

Time: 01:19

State: Something or other

Company: Jazz Taxis

Driver: Male, 22-24, cropped hair, bruised, swearing, sweating,  
high, angry, abusive, bloodied, figuratively emasculated

Car: Hard to tell

Conversation: Queries pertaining to ethos, logos and pathos,  
mostly shouted; difficulty to explain certain abstract reasoning;  
difficulty to explain inability to stop laughing.

Duration: Some time

Fare: Costly

Reaction: Enthusiasm and agreement; several alternate  
suggestions for faster, more certain results

Result: The Cowboy rides alone

BOB HAWK SAYS (free writing advice)

"There are two types of writer: the hermit and the explorer. The explorer is better: he sees the world and documents it, reveals the immensity of the human condition. The hermit, less interesting, can write only of the particular, the minor, not the universal; can write only, ultimately, of himself and his partial understanding of the world. While in the explorer's work one might feel his pulse beat faintly inside each sentence, the

stories of the hermit are, to complete the metaphor, like a series of heart attacks that just won't quite kill him.

“Never forget that the devil is in the detail. There is no copyright on that idiom, so use it when you have some important details to share with your reader. God is also in the detail, so detail is important.

“We hope to see you soon here at Hawk House, where the weather's warm, the beer's cold, and the pages write themselves!” *DAWW*, p566

## BILL TEN

The two men are in a car. Outside details include a bluish sky, early morning sun, the glistening white of wet pavement. Inside-car details include one man, emaciated and pale, bound at the wrists, another driving, threading the steering wheel between rough, experienced hands. A physical detail of the driver is a slight sad drooping of his left eyelid, the eyeball itself milky and raw. The bound man asks the driver if he has a cigarette, asks a second time. The driver nods silently and pulls over to the side of the road. Another outside detail is the lack of any other cars on the road. The driver places a cigarette between the lips of the bound man and lights it. ~~An interior-consciousness detail of the driver is that the second he lights the cigarette he wants to pull it from the shackled man's lips and put it out on his cheek.~~

The driver pulls away from the kerb. The car window is open a little and the whipping breeze brightens the orange tip of the cigarette. The bound man holds the cigarette with both hands, lifts it to his mouth, draws and exhales tediously. His sleeves are rolled up, and ash separates in large flakes, flutters, and lands in the black and blonde hairs on his forearms. The few seconds before his brain registers the gentle warmth are meditative.

The bound man sees a draughts board on the back seat of the car. He asks to play a game with the driver. The bound man says that he knows a park they will soon drive past, where old men play chess. He says that it is too early for anyone to be there, but, even if there was, these men were old war veterans or survivors of one thing or another. They wouldn't look twice.

~~An outside detail—the day is unfolding in an atmosphere of infirmity: a woman with a soft young face is helped into a car with a raised platform and specially designed seat; an ageless boy twists a smile under dried saliva and sexual noises; an old man's shaking hand extends from a chauffeured Rolls Royce parked on the kerb beside a salon, receiving a manicure from a crouching lady in uniform. Imagine.~~

The air in the park isn't yet warm, but both the driver and the bound man feel on their skin the excitement or dread of warmth to come. They sit at a picnic bench and line up two rows of black and red pieces. Outside detail – the park is circular and valleys towards a lake surrounded by ducks, sleeping with their bills tucked under their wings. The bound man moves each piece with both hands. Interior-consciousness detail of driver - bound man reminds him of a child attempting a movement its limbs are unready for. The bound man quickly reaches the crownhead with one piece, then

another two moves later. The game finishes soon after. Two men arrive and set up a chess board on an adjacent table, neither looking over.

The sun on the car windows has warmed the air inside, agitating the molecules. The driver reverses onto the road. The bound man tells him that a little further on there is a small shop he knows will be open. It sells plastic cups of chopped pineapple and orange in jelly. They are kept in a freezer. He says it would be nice to see the shop. Sensory detail of driver - mouth is very dry. The driver shakes his head.

The driver takes a turn that causes the bound man to ask a question. The driver responds that there is one more stop, his tone difficult to gauge. The car moves slowly up a road with a steep gradient. The road is uneven and does not have the usual dollops of white and yellow paint. They pass a farm. The bound man asks the driver why the farmer likes his pigswill black. The driver doesn't respond. The bound man says because he knows what the cows eat. Interior-consciousness of driver – the smile he sees in the other man's face makes him sad.

The driver pulls up the car at the top of a small hill, near a grey granite obelisk. He can tell from the short narrow shadow keeping close to the stone that it must be around midday. Geographical detail – obelisk intentionally situated to provide vista of entire city it overlooks. Botanical detail - saplings latticed around the obelisk not native to the land, must be maintained daily. The driver tells the bound man that this is a good place to see the city. ~~The bound man tells the driver that this city has never meant much to him, that it is the same as any other city. The driver says that he knows the bound man has never been to another city; that he chose to stay in this one his entire life. The bound man says that in his mind he has been to many places. The driver says to the bound man that this is your city. The bound man says to the driver that it never felt like his, that he always felt like he belonged somewhere else. The driver says well you don't get to choose.~~ Two shafts of rainbow bookend the view, truncated, almost like columns. Internal detail – bound man thinks of the coloured lines on the fringes of newspaper pages, as does the driver. ~~Neither will ever know the scope of the other's imagination.~~

The driver holds the bound man by the neck and moves him back into the car, catching his left ear on the black rubber surrounding the doorframe. The bound man grunts and lifts both hands up to hold the top of his ear, which now has a small tear in it.

They drive for several minutes before the driver says look, sorry about your ear. The bound man says it's fine, then: tell that to my cheek. He is gently twisting something between his fingers. Before the driver asks, the bound man says caterpillar, for a butterfly, they smell like ant larvae, so ants bring them to their nest and care for

them, until they hatch and eat the ants. He says that he saw an ant carrying one and took it. The driver looks at the bound man and nods.

The car arrives at a tall iron gate between concrete pillars that look to have once been painted white. A grey intercom box has been attached to a pole with black gaffer tape, placed specifically for the driver of a car to speak into. The driver speaks into it and the gate opens.

A long stretch of straight road leads past several single-storey modular buildings, toward what looks like an identical gate to the one they just entered. The driver stops outside the first small hut and waits until a man in a brown uniform comes out of the door. An interior detail of the small building, as the door closes behind the man in uniform - a neat deck of cards on coffee table. A physical detail of uniformed man - craggy pockmarks of childhood acne over his cheeks. The driver passes the uniformed man a slip of paper. The uniformed man helps the bound man from the car and guides him into the small building. The bound man says thanks for the ride.

The small building is actually quite big inside. Bill thinks of the word *auditorium* and forgets to sigh in relief as the old detective clicks open the lock of the handcuffs, which he must have swapped with the kerchief without Bill noticing.

The crescent-shaped rows of seats pointing downwards towards the stage are mostly empty. The old lady with the eggs is sitting in an aisle seat about half-way, probably for ease of toilet access, but also a little like a wedding guest who hardly knows the bride and groom. Only the front row is full. Even though they are wearing masks, Bill can tell from the posture that his audience is Emily and Jess, the two police officers and the old detective, who reached his seat with surprising stealth.

Bill walks to the lectern in the middle of the stage. The wood creaks underfoot as he steps above his audience. The masks are similar but not identical. The young male officer's has a handsome jawline, a space for his ear to stick out just in case. The female officer's seems bird-like by necessity, her face pointing in a beaky sort of way. The old detective has placed his kerchief over his head, possibly because he left his mask in the car. Jess and Emily's are identical apart from one feature: the placement of a single inky teardrop, one on the left cheek and one on the right. It is difficult to tell them apart until Jess gives Bill the finger.

Bill notices that Grace is positioned in the recess underneath the lectern's desk, much like a scene from one of the *Police Academy* films. She is maskless but heavily make-upped. Bill braces.

The paper on the desk is a simple multiple choice:

Choose **one** of the following:

1. I am sorry
2. I am not sorry
3. Let me explain

It doesn't seem fair to Bill for these to be the only choices; even the third feels too simplistic.

## Part Three

I'm sure you'll agree there's not quite enough of an ending. I mean, I can almost imagine Bill up at the lectern being an ending of sorts but, as it goes, there are a few other places I need to visit before I can call this done.

The truth might be evident: I had something of an *episode* after/during the writing of Bill Ten, the magnitude of which wasn't all that serious, I suppose, but made it near-impossible to compile my notes on the section. 'Flogging a dead horse' etc.

After a few days rest I realised how this story might justify itself, or at least how I could justify the time I'd spent on it. I contacted the few people in my life who I thought might be curious to read, and who could perhaps add some interesting perspectives. My elderly neighbour was the first to be interviewed, while the second part of my interview with Jess actually came before Jazz responded to the request. However, I have organised the following in the way that I think makes most sense.

## Appendix 1: The First Interviews

Interview with Old Detective

Interview with Old Lady w/Eggs

Interview with Jazz

Interview with Jess (one of two)

### Key

... – Denotes a thinking pause, redolent of meaning

// – Denotes an unthinking pause, usually in frustration

!? – Denotes astonishment

~ – Denotes an approximation of what was actually said



## Interview with Old Detective

**[Looking back, I realise I failed to properly depict the physical appearance of the old detective. I referenced his drooping eye once, I recall, and that is indeed a prominent feature. One recognises how minor disfigurements become the focal point of any face, almost holding the other features hostage (his nose turns toward the eye slightly, eyebrow above and cheekbone below cower closely, all as if experiencing Stockholm syndrome). As the interview progresses, the old detective understandably tires. This results in a further correlative drooping and slight watering of said eye. Otherwise he is a handsome man with strong jaw- and hair-lines, large friendly hands and a healthy build for an older man, robust rather than frail. I'd recommend reading the old detective in a Blessed voice, and mine in an Allen voice, though you don't have to.]**

M: Hello. Thanks for coming. To begin, I'd like to ask a few questions about your initial impressions of the work.

OD: *The work?*

M: The story.

OD: *Ah. Well there are several points of confusion for me. What first comes to mind is your fidelity to the conceit you erect at the story's beginning.*

M: My what to the what?

OD: *The conceit of interleaving your story – or 'Bill's' story – with the explicatory notes. One of the main problems I had is the author's own conviction in this conceit, which seems to dwindle as the text develops. It gives the impression the author is losing interest in his own idea, is attempting to move away from it. Or that the author's ego is cumulatively overwhelming the deliberations on the story—it is noticeable that, as the 'notes' sections progress, fewer and fewer references to what they are ostensibly commenting on arise. When combined with a, shall we say, fast and loose attitude towards realism, the end result struggles to avoid frivolity, if not triviality.*

M: My attitude towards realism?

OD: *There are two concerns on this point, but I will focus on realism as a literary construct. You do very little to persuade the reader that much of what is written is plausible. I refer not only to the repetitive quirks such as dictionary/writing guide*

*references and celebrity voices – and it is worth noting re. the latter that Brian Blessed has for a long time been a self-aware pastiche of himself, which results in an unhelpful ambiguity of intent each time you mention him – but also to more rudimentary fictional techniques such as convincingly getting your character to walk across a room.*

M: Fuck off.

OD: *You asked for an opinion! Your anxiety regarding artifice is pointed throughout, from even the opening paragraph. However, when that anxiety, or hostility, turns against the act of verisimilitude we are left with little more than ambiguity and indecision. Consider your narrator asking the reader whether Bill should ‘notice his kitchen,’ before listing a series of common kitchen details. Then there is your propensity for making Bill faint at convenient moments, or moments where figuring out a valid fictional development are apparently inconvenient for the author. To do this self-consciously, as you do, creates the anti-effect of reality: the author supplicates to the reader: my character is alive, has agency! Yet the author fails to generate this agency through fictional modes.*

M: Is all this because I tried to stick you?

OD: *You tried to stick me?*

M: I almost got you!

OD: *I don’t recall that.*

M: So I take it you didn’t read Bill Nine then? When exactly did you stop?

OD: *Look, I only received the document yesterday. The reason I’m...*

M: Well if you’d spent more time with it, had more patience, maybe you’d see that the “anti-effect of reality” is what I was after all along.

OD: *Was that your intention from the beginning or merely a defence you have thought up in the moment to deflect criticism.*

M: Specifics are neither here nor there.

OD: *I see. Well tell me about your notes. They have the curious effect of refusing interpretation, insisting on authorial control.*

M: How so?

OD: *Do you not see? A reader has no sooner finished Bill's story than he is suffocated by the author's intrusions. That several of these intrusions appear to misinterpret the story only serves an extra dollop of confusion on poor reader's plate.*

M: Is there something wrong with trying to explain your intentions? Perhaps, since my ignominy, I've been hypersensitive to interpretation.

OD: *Ah, yes, your ignominy. Do you plan to reveal the details at any point?*

M: Yes, in appendix four.

OD: *I'm sure your readers will be excited to get there.*

**[The old detective became silent at this point and gently touched his drooping eye, almost as if to wonder if it was in fact an injury I inflicted. I was about to ask him about his own appearances in the text before he regained himself and his role of interrogator]**

OD: *So let's get this straight, the boy who informed you of your mother's death, the individual you once took cocaine with in a nightclub and Father Drummond are one and the same person?*

**[Here I recognised the error in providing the detective with both the story and the explanatory notes, although he'd hardly have agreed to the interview if I'd only sent the former.]**

M: Yes, I believe so, although I noted in the text that I may be mistaken about the cocaine.

OD: *Still sounds unlikely, even in a work of fiction.*

M: **[//] [...] [//]**

OD: *And this is your Bill, who seems to be a bizarre mix of several half-understood psychoanalytic theories?*

M: Well maybe the problem's that there isn't a theory sufficient for Bill.

OD: *At least you have not provided one.*

M: I've provided the information, the evidence. I'm not a theorist. If I gave you a multi-tiered sandwich I wouldn't tell you how to eat it.

**[To my surprise this seemed to satisfy the old detective, who nodded as if to say that he wasn't a theorist, either, and that he would have no truck with them generally. Maybe it was more about the sandwich thing.]**

OD: *Right-o. I have some questions about the murder to which you confessed. There are a few incongruities in your story, like where exactly you lived around that time. You mention a maisonette in a cul-de-sac, but in the 'confession' itself you refer to living in a crimped two-bed terrace on the brim of a main road.*

M: I was under the impression I'd be asking the questions?

OD: *That is not how it works.*

M: [...] [/ /]

OD: *Look my dear, I'm here for clarity. I want you to know that neither Father William Drummond nor the diocese wish for the Crown to charge you with anything. Father Drummond himself has said that you are welcome back to the church whenever you wish. My main concern is with the supposed murder. A young male was indeed killed at a similar time and place to when and where you describe. I need to know whether we are working with a factual confession or a piece of fiction.*

**[For some reason this question infuriated me. I don't recall my response specifically – all transcripts in this appendix were never recorded and have been completed entirely from memory – but the sentiment was that there's some blurring of the lines between the two forms, that not only 'fiction' is an artificial construct but anything that claims to assert truth through the imprecise tool of language.]**

OD: *Yes, I believe that conceit has been used before. I know you've been under stress, what with the Emily... situation and the incident at the charity event. I don't think you are guilty of anything, but if you have information about what happened that night you should tell me. It won't cause you any trouble.*

**[This is the old detective I'd struggled to create in the story: authoritative, caring, and confident: exactly the presence I wanted in the cold and lonely pages of Bill.]**

M: Why don't you go and shoot your cock off.

OD: *I can see I'm wasting my time. I'm not sure what you wanted, but it is something I cannot provide.*

M: Wait. Just tell me one thing, okay?

OD: *Be quick.*

M: Did I get it right?

OD: *Did you get what right?*

M: The parts. The parts you were there for. Did I get it just like it was?

**[The detective rubbed his eye and sighed. It seemed his reluctance was in acknowledging he'd have to shed some air of professionalism to answer me. Another sigh, then he pulled the manuscript from his worn leather satchel and thumbed to a page in the middle that had been folded at the corner. For almost an hour we sat silently as he read, flicking between pages that looked to have been marked with a red pen, spending significant time on the final chapter; the only change in his countenance being an occasional arching of the eyebrow above his sagging eyelid, which seemed a more accurate example of irony than provided in the Checkhardt.]**

OD: *Well, no. You didn't get any of those occasions exactly as I recall them, although some more than others. In Emily's home at the very beginning of your... story, you were quite accurate, although you were scant with detail. However, I was quite confused by your decision to leave a lingering sense of 'Bill,' as a suspect. Your dream scene in the desert, I think you can appreciate, makes me a little uncomfortable.*

*I have a question: in your notes to section three you wrote that Bill "forced every single moment of your life into feeling like a staged existence, a kind of irreality you observe yet can't touch." It is my opinion that this is the closest you get to revealing what Bill is to you, and what he is to Drummond. Can you explain it any better?*

**[So he was curious after all!]**

M: No, that's as good as I can do.

OD: *Oh, my dear! Do you not see that the biggest confusion will be between the Bill sections and Father Drummond's role in this ordeal? To go to this trouble and then fail to unfurl such a tangled tale seems a tad... perverse.*

- M: I decided early on not to provide the tock, not to offer a false resolution just because the impulse exists. We choose to resist so many desires, why not that? And if a tock's required then I'm certain it can be found by those willing to look.
- OD: *The tock?*
- M: You didn't even get to Bill Six?!
- OD: *Which is the part with the long lock picking section?*
- M: Bill Five!
- OD: *Yes, I found it difficult to proceed from there. I mean, you do go on a bit. It's not that I haven't read the rest, but I found it difficult to keep focus from thereon.*
- M: Picking a lock isn't a simple task! Bill's sections depict a slow passing of time rather than some Hollywood cut whenever there's a dull moment.
- OD: *Yes, it was evident you had researched how to pick a certain type of lock, less so that you ever attempted the method in practice. But that is not what I'm referring to: you suggest autonomy on Bill's part in this section, ceding authorial control. It is not the only occasion, but perhaps the most pointed. Is it supposed to be blindly accepted that your fictional character has somehow grown legs, as it were?*
- M: I was describing the truth as accurately as I could, the sensation of being resisted by something, some force, whether subconscious or ghostly, pulling possession of the story away from me. I'm merely documenting the reality of the situation.
- OD: *Another familiar conceit—one I have noticed is attractive to authors uncomfortable with the mysteries of their imaginations. It is curious that you consider it documenting yet refuse to elaborate on the details of the stabbing twenty-so years ago. You pick and choose when to document reality!*
- M: Authorship's the one thing I have, and, as you can see, even the things I choose to write get compromised by the impossibility of interpretation.
- OD: *Or your own indecision. It may strike a fellow that you wrote this entire thing to eulogise Emily, for whatever reason, but many more will assume it was to purge the guilt you've carried since the murder. Yet you fail: it's a monstrous rationale of the act you suggest.*

- M: If they've been entertained it makes no difference to me. And if they haven't then I'm sure they don't mull over my intentions or my reasoning.
- OD: *Son, all those years ago, did you kill the boy?*
- M: It doesn't *matter*. I've thought it and I've justified it. In the terms that are important I'm guilty. Would you like to arrest me?
- OD: [Sighs] *What if the boy who was stabbed was my one unsolved case, the one that haunts my sleep?*
- M: I don't think it is. Did you like the ending? Of the story?
- OD: [Flicking to the end of the manuscript again] *I found it confusing.*
- M: Why?
- OD: *Because I picked you up from the bridge, not the school. And it was night time. I don't understand why you have added those fictional details. We never stopped to play draughts, nor did I take you to a mysterious building with a guard, make you speak at a lectern. And we specifically stopped for frozen pineapple chunks in Jelly! You were adamant about that!*
- M: The draughts game was supposed to represent something, I forget what exactly; the eternal futility of conflict? Or maybe something to do with the dynamic of male relationships being based on formality and dominance.
- OD: *Are those themes you wanted to explore?*
- M: Not particularly. I suppose it would be nice for them to be lingering allusions. I think I liked the idea of an exchange without language. Words weren't helpful to me at all over this period.
- OD: *Yes, I recall you were very quiet. And the building where I delivered you?*
- M: That was supposed to represent the inextricable solitude in which one must cope with grief, loss, the place without language, too remote for the imperfect tool of language to congeal into meaning.
- OD: [...] *Oh.*
- M: What?

OD: *No, nothing. I suppose that makes some sense.*

M: You don't sound satisfied.

OD: *Perhaps not. I hoped for something more, I am unsure what. You have left me in a quandary. [...] Might it not be more pertinent if I was to pick you up from an old abandoned church, and the confrontation with Father Drummond had been in your old school instead?*

M: Why do you say that?

OD: *The two institutions are evidently important to you and appear to have shaped both you and the story. But your education in some sense might have ended with the Father Drummond altercation, or at least that's what you suggest. On the other hand, you still haven't quite reconciled your history with the church. Perhaps that should be the place you were hiding, if not the bridge.*

M: Well it's written now. I couldn't bear to go back and start messing around with things.

OD: [...]

**[Long pause here: the old detective performing some pretty standard thinking gestures involving hand and face.]**

M: What?

OD: *I'm thinking of these readings, or misreadings, of Freud that you mention once or twice: I suppose one could say you have created, in your relationship with Bill, a form of perverse reversal of the ego and superego, given voice and agency to the latter, muted the former, revelled in the failure of its messy orchestration.*

M: I suppose.

OD: *But if we were to apply this idea rigorously we would probably see it fail.*

M: That's true with most things, I find.

OD: *And Bill himself—perhaps I'm being assumptive—there seems to be a desire to frame him, categorise him, as the tragic hero—a serious misunderstanding, I think, of tragedy.*

M: How so?



OD: *There is no change of fortune for Bill—you show him to us in the midst of his grief—you depict his unravelling—but there is no good before the bad—no good at all [!?!]—we must understand what has been lost if we are to feel his loss!*

M: I wasn't asking how I've failed. I wanted to know why you think I'm trying to write a tragedy.

OD: *What else could it be? [!?!]*

M: [...]

[This was a good question, I suppose. I look back now on my opening and it feels remote, like a different writer with much different concerns. And I see that the question never occurred to me: what is it that you're writing? What's at stake here, as Bob Hawk would say. I can see notes of uncertainty in that long opening chapter, circling the alligator or whatever (was it a crocodile? I can't bear to look back), but perhaps the problem, or one of them, was that I never came to a clear understanding of what I was writing. *Was* it a tragedy? I don't think so, although am I the right person to say? I went back to my method of opening and closing the Checkhardt in the hope of finding an answer but alas... although I did find something: SONNET, from 'sonetto,' meaning 'little sound.' It's not perfect, of course (the rest of the entry for the term was all about lines and rhymes), but what is? It was comforting to think I could make a little sound and that maybe it might be heard.]

OD: [...]

M: [...]

[With that, the old detective nodded sadly and stood to leave. I saw him out of my flat, downstairs and outside, where he stopped in the door recess and lit a cigarette without offering one to me. He observed the door to the block and asked loudly, rhetorically, whether it was one of the doors mentioned in the HISTORIC LIST OF MY FRONT DOORS (few developments this generation), which made me think he paid more attention than he let on. I asked if he wouldn't mind a second interview after he'd had another chance to read over the story, but he refused. I would've liked to talk more about the ending. A slight breeze caught his final exhalation of smoke and directed the grey pungent wisps into my face. As he turned to say goodbye he looked directly into my watering eyes. I regret that he almost certainly thought I was crying.]

## Interview with the old lady with the eggs

[So as not to alarm her, I had planned to orchestrate a seemingly chance encounter with the old lady at the minimarket. Sadly, my timing was off in this case: I waited three days running for her to arrive, from 8am to 6pm the first two, and then an entire stretch of 24 hours. In the end I posted the manuscript through her letter box—not sure if you recall my mention of the old woman who lives behind the sepia window across from me, pottering around the Aga in her kitchen with her diminishing husband? One and the same: my world, you’ll have surmised, is a small one. At the time of our meeting she was wearing a light blue cardigan and dark blue skirt that was hemmed a few inches below the knee. Over her thin calves were flesh-coloured stockings that did not completely hide dark veins that bulged like the embossed mountain ranges you get in really good atlases. Her hair was permed loosely and short, grey, and flattened at the back as if she had only recently woken.]

M:                   The first thing I should ask is whether or not you remember me?

OLwtE:           *But you already asked that?*

M:                   I know, but for the record, now that the interview has started.

OLwtE:           *Well you’d hardly be sitting in my living room if I didn’t, would you?  
Hardly be drinking a cup of tea in my living room.*

M:                   No, I understand. But could you just confirm that...

OLwtE:           *I remember you lying on the shop floor*

M:                   Okay.

OLwtE:           *Did you make it home okay? The staff were all very worried.*

M:                   They were?

OLwtE:           *They didn’t say that. But I’m sure they were. Did you wet your trousers?*

M:                   [...] Yes.

OLwtE:           *It’s terrible, really. We were all so worried.*

M: Okay. Thanks. Shall we talk about the story?

OLwtE: *Well, all the sodomy wasn't for me. There's a reason it's spoken of negatively in the bible.*

M: What? There's no sodomy!

OLwtE: *Of course there is! The sodomy of the uncle, the sodomy of... is it the young man whose family own the minimarket?*

M: Yes, but there's no...

OLwtE: *All I'm saying is that I don't think it's necessary, this fixation on that kind of thing.*

M: I'll take it into consideration. What did you think of the rest of it?

OLwtE: *I must say that I normally only read Catherine Cookson. The library has all her books in large print. Your print was far too small. Albert's reading glasses are stronger than mine, but still...*

M: OK. Were you offended by my description of you in the minimarket? My mention of you and... Albert?

OLwtE: *You have my permission. One doesn't worry so much at my age. You should try it yourself, ageing, and you'll see how silly all those bridge visits at midnight sound. Albert has taken to calling you Bridgett! [chuckles], although he is almost completely senile these days. My middle name, his mother's too, although she was a larger woman, is Bridgett, of course...*

M: Oh, I'm sorry. If there's anything I can do to help...

OLwtE: *You remind me in a way of Charlie in The Cinder Path, especially how you never quite realise your windows are two-way, if you allow me to literalise the metaphor for a moment.*

M: I... [/ /] what do you mean?

OLwtE: *You never describe the water when you stand on the bridge. And I "mean" we see you staring, dear, into our kitchen every day. Albert calls you Starey Mary, which is similar to the name we gave his first wife. He is*

*rather taken by that young girl you have over, though, the one without clothes.*

M: Her name is Grace.

OLwtE: *Albert has taken to calling her Sugar Tits.*

M: [...] Tell me, is the story overly male. I know it's about a man, of course, but as a woman did you find anything interesting in it?

OLwtE: *When I was your age a man wouldn't ask that sort of question.*

M: No, I suppose not. Well, I should probably be off.

OLwtE: *Yes, Albert will be back from his walk soon.*

M: Aha, then I should leave before he arrives to make sure he doesn't get suspicious!

OLwtE: *What do you mean?*

M: [...] Nothing, just [...], a younger man...

OLwtE: *You're mumbling dear...*

M: Just, you know, coming home and finding a younger man in the house...

OLwtE: *Oh! No, no, of course! He certainly would never be worried about that.*

**[I've tried not to think too much about the nuance of meaning in her last comment. Since the interview I have seriously considered purchasing curtains, although the process is more complicated than I ever imagined.]**

## Interview with Jazz

[Despite being the first to be asked Jazz failed to respond to the first two interview requests, which gives you an indication of the difficulties I had with this aspect of the project. His agreement at the third attempt was, I believe, partly due to superstition and partly due to running out of weed. He began the conversation by emphatically waving his hand in front of my face as I began to apologise. He was wearing a plush baby blue sport tracksuit of perhaps velour, the jacket zipped up to a high collar that touched the black fuzz on his chin. As expected, he became more amiable and less hostile (but not quite amiable nor unhostile) as the weed took effect.]

J: *I've told you before it's Bihari not Urdu, soft cunt. And you're wrong anyway: they were speaking Bengali.*

M: Oh, apologies I...

J: *And the fuck you writing about me<sup>1</sup> sister?*

[Jazz here is referring to some similarities between certain elements of the minimarket in Bill Three and the one owned by his family on the next block of our street. These are purely superficial congruities, amplified perhaps by the generally homogeneous nature of many retailers esp. in this geographical location.]

M: Jazz, honestly, I had no intention of making it seem like anyone in the story resembles anyone you know.

J: *Everyone in the story's someone I know, soft cunt. Jazz is in the fucking story.*

M: Certain aspects had to be accurate, yes, but I'll change all the names prior to making it public.

J: *What's Jazz's name gonna be then?*

M: Jazz

J: *Jazz likes it.*

[Jazz becomes close to amiable, if slightly incoherent at times. His joint is potent, and his sentences are elongated, sometimes dramatically]

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<sup>1</sup> Really, I've tried to avoid the colloquial at all times, but with Jazz this particular sound is so pronounced I'd feel fraudulent to depict it any other way.

M: Do you have any thoughts on the sidekick as a literary foil for exposing the vulnerability of an antihero?

J: *Me thoughts on what?*

M: Never mind, I don't think it applies anyway. Jazz, I'd like to talk just briefly about the night at the church. Do you have any recollection of it?

J: *Jazz don't [...] remember nothing.*

M: Do you not recall what you did to Drummond? To the priest? Kicking him in the back?

J: **[Laughs]** [...] *Sic* [...] *k*

M: Do you remember what he said, exactly? What he was saying just before you kicked him? He had me on the ground and was saying something, do you remember?

J: [...] *He's* **[laughs]** *Jazz heard him* **[laughs]** [...] *Jazz hear* **[laughs]** *"gis' a tongue, slag"* **[much laughter]**.

**[After several more minutes of laughing, to the point of crying and coughing, Jazz quietens, as do I. We begin again to talk – abstractly about god, the theory that, similar to the sci-fi notion of humans inventing robots smarter than themselves, god had indeed done something similar with us, although we were at present only halfway toward the moment of superseding our creator – but it is impossible to know which of us is talking and who is agreeing with nods. An opaque mist settles in the room, lending a sense of mystery to the occasion. I'm awoken at some later time by Jazz repeating the same sentence: "Don't even dare. Don't even dare." As I see him out, he's careful to walk beside me and not in front. The dog sniffs at him near the door and he squats to stroke it rather than bending over.]**

## Interview with Jess – Part One of Two

[When Jess arrives at my door there is a minor confusion. Initially it's physical, as I don't recognise her. Only when she performs a familiar facial expression do I understand it's her, and that she's gained a great deal of weight. Like literally she is fat now. I can report both happiness and sadness at this sight: as contented as one might be to see their jilters' bodies fail them it's also a judgement of sorts, I've found, and it reminds me she must have the exact same admixture of feelings upon seeing my bloated frame. I can report only sadness when she takes off her coat and I realise she's pregnant. I admit this may have tempered the interview slightly, especially since she seemed somewhat smug. My responses are slightly sullied from the panic of wondering who the father could be. Not that it was me, I knew. We sat in the living room. She brought her own teabags.]

M: So you've read the...

J: *What the fuck does "old fashioned body" mean?*

M: I. It was more in the sense that you have a classic frame, back when women were real wo...

J: *Spare me. I've seen your internet history.*

M: It was a compliment rather tha...

J: *I don't understand why you're bringing all this up again. Don't you have any shame? Isn't it embarrassing for you?*

M: Parts were difficult to write, yes, but I felt it was important that this version of...

J: *Version. You mean the utterly deluded fabrication of events that you are trying to pass off as reality? Why are you even doing this? You manage to make everyone look worse, especially yourself.*

M: I've thought a lot about truth. As I intimate on several occasions, I see no reason to privilege external perception over internal.

J: *Oh my god. You think what you make up in your weird little fucking baby man brain is somehow as real as the actual things people experience?*

M: Jess, I fear you're not coming across in the best light right now.

- J: *Don't dare start talking to me like you're in front of an audience!*<sup>1</sup>
- M: Well, as Bob Hawk says, the whole world's...
- J: *Shut fucking up! Does that lunatic even exist or is he a figment of your imagination?*
- M: He's real, although I had to change his name.
- J: *Whatever. I don't know what you want from me, what you expect me to say about this piece of shit you've written. Am I supposed to take it seriously?*
- M: It's serious. I mean, *I* take it seriously. I thought if nothing else it could explain my side of things.
- J: *Your side? Your side of things is the side people put in the looney bin! Why do you think anyone would give one rabbit shit about your side of things?*
- M: Since my ignominy I've had a lot of time to...
- J: *Your what?*
- M: My ignominy! My—I've referenced it several times in the tex...
- J: *Oh, you mean your disgusting perversion? Sorry to disappoint but nobody remembers. You can venture outside again now. In fact, I seriously recommend you give it a go.*
- M: You'd be surprised how the public's collective memory endures...
- J: *The public? Who the fuck do you think you are? You had like what two venues in the city that put you on? It was a hobby, you freak! I don't know how you found yourself in that situation in the first place but it certainly had nothing to do with "the public".*
- M: Look, I don't want to get into the success of my...
- J: *Hah!*
- M: ...the success of my comedy career. If you don't have anything to say about the story then we can end our conversation here.

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<sup>1</sup>Obviously the exclamation marks are my own, not Jess's. Authorial control and all that, I know, but she really was very agitated.



J: *Oh, I have a lot to say. A lot. Like what the fuck, and how dare you? I have that to say. I also have to say well fucking done on mentioning nothing of what really happened between us or with Emily? Or anything about your sordid little exploits? Oh no, wait, you do mention whoreface don't you! Of course it's all "Bill thought this, Bill did that" when it gets too close to reality, though.*

M: You mean Grace? I don't think I...

[At this point I had to refer back to the text. Jess was indeed correct, that the Grace character, a real person who had a minor involvement in the series of difficulties Jess and I went through in the final months of our relationship, was mentioned. I had no recollection of this at the time of the conversation, as, if you recall, she was only briefly mentioned in Bill Seven.]

J: *Oh my god, you can't even remember what you wrote! Look at you, fumbling with your fat stupid fingers!*

[I had a printed copy of the text prepared for our conversation. Jess was aware that her physical insult was one I was particularly sensitive to]

J: *You have absolutely no idea what you're doing, do you? You sit around and get drunk and stoned with that whore and, when she passes out, you write this weird fucking story to... what? Ease your guilt? Re-style yourself as something other than a perverted stalker?*

[Unfortunately, facts can often feel like bad fiction. Unbeknownst, Grace ('Sugar Tits' to Albert and the OLwtE) had been listening to the conversation from the front door. I know the word *hysterical* probably gets used far too often to describe a woman in heightened emotion, so I won't deploy it here. What transpired lasted a few seconds: two brief scuffles, one between Jess and Grace, one between Grace and me; then Grace's confirmation that, instead of leaving to go shopping for a few hours, she'd in fact double-backed and followed Jess to my flat. Neither woman hesitated in engaging physically despite Jess's pregnancy, which I'd actually forgotten about until her bump balanced pregnantly between their flailing arms, like a kind of metaphor for how we deal with our vulnerability, the vulnerability of others. As the interview resumes, Grace is now in the room, wearing running shorts and a white vest, sitting cross-legged on the floor, the hard yellow rinds of her heels reminiscent of a smoker's fingers, in her fingers a burning cigarette, finally calm.]

J: *And this whore can stop staring at me, too*

[Another minor scuffle ensues, before I'm able to placate both women. Grace agrees to leave on the promise of a little coke later tonight. I actually say to Jess "think of the child," which is my first verbal acknowledgement of her 'interesting condition'. Although she'll later deny it, less than a minute after Grace walks out, there's the unmistakeable sound of Jazz's front door opening and closing below. We resume after several minutes of what would be silence if Jess's sighing wasn't so pronounced.]

J: *How long have you had her here?*

M: She doesn't live here, just stays on occasion.

J: *It's interesting that you don't make any reference to her involvement...*

M: It's really not her story, Jess. It's the story of the aftermath of...

J: *Oh, yeah, the story of how your heart's broken and how everything means something else or reconfigures or some shit because Emily killed herself. You didn't even fucking know her! You were prank calling her for God's sake!*

**[Shouting]**

M: They were never pranks! You can see from the story that I knew her.

J: *I don't know how you can even say something like that! You're not 'storytelling,' you're trying to control the truth. And the whole thing with the boy you claim to have murdered? You're a monster!*

M: I told the truth! Don't think I've stopped caring, Jess. I care about you.

J: *What, as much as the sour-faced whore you pay to watch take a shit on a webcam<sup>1</sup> and who now, apparently, lives with you and creeps around like a stinking fucking secret squirrel wearing a stinking wife-beater over her saggy tits? [Grace enjoys loose clothing, which to some can seem slovenly. She tends to smell of garlic and chewing gum.]*

M: Squirrel?

J: *Shut the fuck up! You didn't tell the truth, you selected tiny little pieces of the truth, mixed it with delusion, and used it to define us. Define Emily, me, our family. The truth is an entire life and you can't make a fucking book tell it accurately. You know the only thing that interested me in this weird little fantasy you've written? Near the beginning when you said storytelling was bullshit, that you'd be completely honest. I thought maybe you'd actually hold to it, but no. You propped up a few facts like stilts and built a whole fucking house of lies on top, like always. You should've jumped off that bridge.*

**[At this point, Jess struggled heavily from her seat, flapping away my helping hand (imagine a slightly flustered seal struggling from a rock), and left. She'd provided only superficial judgements**

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly inaccurate reference to my ignominy

of the text, nothing really specific. This was disappointing. I was keen to hear her interpretations of several passages, including all of Bill Four. But she was correct about one thing: I hadn't provided everything. There's much more written than what's provided in parts one and two, things discarded for one reason or another. An individual's output will always be partial, refracted by perception, but the very least I can do is offer up every bit of that output.]

## Appendix 2: Omissions

I've compiled these outtakes as best I can – into broad subject-specific groupings – in order to provide the reader with as vivid a sense of her or his author as possible. Some are false starts or flat endings, unhelpful deviations and curious remarks I barely recall, while others I am satisfied with but found no way to include in the story of Bill or the explicatory notes. They provide little in the way of narrative thrust but might be of minor interest to those who have read this far. Taken as a whole, parts one, two and this appendix provide the entire output over the year-long period of writing. For the more oblique and obscure entries I have footnoted explanations or interpretations wherever possible, as well as offering some reflective comments here and there.

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### 1. Aspects of Living

- 1.1. Re. pets: both I and my dog have toilet concerns.<sup>1</sup> I'll concentrate on hers. Loud, unexpected noises and general frights make her clam up, her tail literally right in there between her legs in the way of the cliché. Sometimes I can be walking around for hours waiting for her to drop (she's dropped inside on several occasions and seems to have no issue doing so, hence the persistence on my part: let's just say stepping in a fresh drop unsocked is let's just say the worst), and no amount of encouragement, concealed or faux-casual nudges with my foot that definitely aren't proper kicks, or actual physical demonstrations of the act – or at least the shape a body might take to perform the act – seem to persuade her. One of the most satisfying sights in my life right now is that of her pursed pink anus primed for a movement, especially since she's also afraid of the rain and it's been a particularly wet few months (she's also afraid of leaves, both coupled and uncoupled from branches, and most things that move). My own movements can be unpersuasive at times, too, which may have something to do with long periods spent on the old throne, as Main Uncle once

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<sup>1</sup> Initially this entry was to build off Bill's fear of injury through defecation in Bill Eight. I had referenced acquiring a dog in the notes to Bill Seven but had never been quite comfortable with that entry. Whatever was on my mind resulted in my refraining from mentioning her further, aside from the entry ADDENDUM RE. 'GUILT' (domestication and its discontents) from the notes to Bill Nine.

called it under his breath (it's where I do the majority of my imagining, something I believe is consistent with the married male and something I've carried over into bachelorhood, or something I carried into marriage and preserved with great determination, or something marriage didn't or couldn't wear away in the harsh winds of domestication like it did my spirit and my erections).

1.1.1. She has no idea how unattractive she is when she begs for food. Still, the idea of a duty to make her content, to be entirely responsible for whatever degree of happiness she can experience...

1.2. Obviously there are variations to the texture of any day, although this is a fairly accurate summation of what happened at least 350 times over the last year.<sup>1</sup>

- Sleeping: 3.5 hours
- Lying in bed awake trying to sleep: 7.5 hours
- Napping: 2 hours
- Sitting on toilet: 1 hour: this used to be time for contemplation, but over the years it has become more necessary due to the increasing volatility of my expulsions.
- Preparing and eating food: 2.5 hours: I follow the vaguely Buddhist formula for eating, in that I place my fork down upon taking a bite and try to fully appreciate each mouthful of food, chewing and swallowing before picking the fork back up. It's a tedious experience with instant noodles but a habit I've persisted with nevertheless.
- Smoking: 1 hour: fifty cigarettes a day, plus additional time for finding fire source, lighting and extinguishing each cigarette. Chosen brand burn slightly faster than average. ~.25 hours could be incorporated into toilet hour.
- Masturbating: 1 hour: I masturbate no less than two and no more than five times a day. A day of minimum self-pleasure will usually contain two long, luxurious and contemplative sessions of about thirty minutes each. I should incorporate the majority of any additional sessions into

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<sup>1</sup> Originally this section was due to be in place of what became IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (listless, getting to know your guy) (p3). Omitted due to my never being able to get to a clean 24 hours, no matter how many times I recalculated.

the 7.5 hours of not sleeping. I have not included time taken to clean up afterwards, which can be up to ten minutes per session, depending. Clean-up N/A for shorter, in-bed sessions.

- Writing (Comedy): 1.5 hours: I have persisted, intra-ignominy, to write one joke a day. I believe the dedication may be linked to my Buddhist tendency with food, although in an obscure way I can't fully explain.
- Writing (this): 1.5 hours: I find this comes in bursts that puncture inertia. The (approx.) fifteen minutes of actual writing tend to require the 1.25 hours of not-writing as a kind of run-up before the jump.
- Fascination with the wallpaper: 1 hour: this can mostly – but not completely – be incorporated into the 2x1.5 hours of writing, a sudden interest in the wallpaper, the patterns that are always present and the ones that emerge fleetingly, never really there at all.
- General essentials: 1 hour: dressing, undressing, washing, urinating, defecating: some – not all – can be completed during contemplation hour on toilet.
- Grace time: 8 hours: interleaved throughout day.

1.3. Re. ageing: How dare people laugh at the mid-life crisis? It's perhaps the noblest period of an individual's life. People are wrong when they think it's a desperate grasp at lost youth—it's one of the few honest acknowledgements of our finitude, looking not backward but forward. Not that I'm going through one myself.<sup>1</sup>

1.3.1. The occasions of me being publically dismissed as a sexual possibility are piling up. Today, a teenage waitress in a café didn't even bother being rude to me. At one point I'm certain she came close to helping me out of my chair.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from a fleeting reference in the opening pages - IT'S A FUNNY TIME IN THE LIFE OF THE COWBOY (listless, getting to know your guy) – I'm surprised at myself for not ruminating on my ageing more frequently. This seemed like the place to do it. I suppose, like in life itself, things distract you from thinking too much about the passing of time, which tends to introduce itself to you as a kind of shock.

<sup>2</sup> Some entries, like this, are bits that didn't actually occur due to my preference to stay indoors, which means they are plausible imaginations that rattle against one another's inconsistencies of tone, time and temper. One of the difficulties of assembling these entries is that many qualify for more than one category. Like everything in life, they can be seen in different contexts.

- 1.4. Re. drinking: I'm the worst kind of alcoholic because I'm also a masochist: I'll wait agonising hours for the first drink, savouring the anticipation of the first sip and the immediate rush. Sometimes I fall asleep without even drinking!
- 1.4.1. I am Przewalski's horse and you can all fuck a chunk.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.4.2. If the Manichean devil is on one shoulder and the angel on the other, neither's exactly going to have full control over my arms and legs, you know? So it's less that He wanted a puppet show, rather like a, fucking, I don't know. Nobody needs to give monkeys machine guns is what I mean.
- 1.4.3. I'm yet to disagree with anything Buttplug57 has to say about HornyCouple69 or America.
- 1.4.4. I turned the shard just like the bastard that I am, a half remembered Catholic guilt that surprised me even back then amid the playground snot crust squeals of children with parents who insisted they were half Irish and made a bigger deal of Tuesday confession than Sunday mass. There was a little *fiat*-flicker of his left hand before he slumped which made me smile, like he had the final say. Typical that he could take this away from me but in some way a relief, too.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.4.5. I've made my bed and now I'll go and fuck myself in it, said the something to the something.
- 1.4.6. Spiderwasps. Big spider with legs and such but that flies like a wasp and stings and all (Woody Guthrie voice). Black and yellow stripes.
- 1.4.7. u make em laugh but they still forget abt u
- 1.4.8. First time getting drunk: I was thirteen, a two litre bottle of Woodpecker cider consumed in about an hour on the street with a friend who decided to stick to cola.<sup>3</sup> I was pretty far gone. He brought me back to his parent's place and set up a bed for me at the foot of his own. I woke up vomiting into a pillow, which I proceeded to scoop up and launch out of his window without anyone noticing. The window was shall we say the

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<sup>1</sup> My inebriated ramblings were omitted from the main text when possible. For the benefit of readers interested in a general overview of the author around this period I include them here. For context, after drinking, it was the author's tendency to trawl the internet for conversation. When this was unsuccessful, the author would often search for 'interesting facts'.

<sup>2</sup> First attempt at writing CONFESSION (for I have sinned): rejected due to overly indulgent style.

<sup>3</sup> I realise there are no real references to my having friends in the main text. This is mostly because I don't have any, at least at present. It would be disingenuous to class Jazz in that category. Or Jess. I do hope to make some friends in the future.

opposite of open. I walked across his bedroom and hallway towards the bathroom, just kind of steadily vomiting in a no-big-deal sort of way, then filled the sink with more vomit. I'd eaten an entire pack of cherry flavoured throat lozenges earlier that day, which meant the top floor house was like a menthol-y crime scene. I heard my friend crying "why? why?" from his bedroom. I remember his parents were entertaining church-going friends from Denmark (I'd actually meet this couple once again, several years later, along with their two beautifully blonde and bronze children, during my unfortunate few weeks as a Fidesco volunteer.<sup>1</sup> I guess they were on a missionary respite weekend or something all those years ago. They didn't recognise the 22 year-old me at all). His mother came up to console me and I vomited on her beige combat trousers, the thigh and calf pockets of which were thankfully buttoned closed. She told me it was okay. A little blackout and the next thing I'm being driven home by the mother, sitting in the passenger seat with the Danish couple in the back. They were all coming up with suggestions of what I should tell my 'parents' – I have flu, I ate bad seafood, etc. I said I thought honesty was the best policy, which was well-received. Being well-received has never not been important to me. The Danish guy started clapping and saying "that's excellent to hear," the little silver crucifix around his neck dull under the passing amber streetlamps. I turned around and vomited over his hands. To his credit he clapped at least one full clap before wiping himself down on his own beige combat trousers and telling me I was a good kid.<sup>2</sup>

1.4.9. You're reporting on yourself, a voyeur of yourself. Are you getting off on you?

1.5. Re. illness: I used to feign stomach pains as a child. My mother took serious interest in illness. Most things bored her. Television was tedious, as was gossip or any kind of conversation. But illness was fascinating, partly because of the excuses it offered and partly because she liked the idea of a dead son, which is another kind of excuse (don't get me wrong, she'd never wanted me to die. She

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<sup>1</sup> Not something I really want to get into. There have been times in my life when I've made vague attempts at being a good person. Circumstances, etc.

<sup>2</sup> You probably won't be surprised to hear that this true story became a bit – one of my more successful.



was just infatuated with the sadness she could show to the world). Thing is, I'd never do it for her attention—perhaps at first I would, but it became immediately clear that her attention was given wholly to the invented illness, which she willed into reality from her side to the extent that it began to hurt. It was more that I inherited her desire for excuses, for absolution from responsibility. You<sup>1</sup> won't be surprised to learn I didn't know my grandparents, but I can't tell you how many times my poor little granny has passed away whenever there has been an obligation I've wanted to avoid. And though every time, every lie, casts me so far from everyone else I feel like another species, I've never stopped.<sup>2</sup>

1.5.1. My macular hole requires surgery. They've told me the black jizz will almost certainly stop wriggling around after an operation, although I won't see as well as I once did. This was very matter-of-fact: we'll fix you but you won't be as good as you once were. It seems like medical science exists to ensure people live badly for a long time, which I suppose suits the pharmaceutical industry. If anything I write has a Mel Gibson *Conspiracy Theory* outcome it will probably be that last sentence.

1.5.2. My macular hole's getting me down. Poetic justice for all the facial bukkake porn I watched in my 20s?

1.5.3. My bowels have never been a friend.

1.6. Re. conflict:<sup>3</sup> if I'm reading Freud correctly, it's more likely we should hate our neighbours rather than go with Mark's gospel. I hope Jazz doesn't read Freud. I doubt he does. He probably hasn't read the gospels either.

1.6.1. I don't have anything to say about war. The reasons for war have always been too complicated or facile for me to understand. Or, for wars that begin today, it always seems I'm a week or two too late for the background reading needed to pick a side. However, here's something: isn't it weird that people today are engorged with pride over the actions of long dead soldiers, long dead governments? I have no problem with

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<sup>1</sup> Note my direct reference to the reader here. The outtakes are not organised chronologically in each section, but my familiarity towards a reader begins early re. life issues. Retrospectively, I admit the assumption I'd have an audience went unchecked.

<sup>2</sup> This is one of a series of entries that's really re. addiction to victimhood.

<sup>3</sup> Reason for omission of these entries is simply because there wasn't enough conflict in the main section. I expected more and, by the time the Drummond encounter came about, the idea of discussing these issues made me nauseous.

remembrance days and whatnot, the celebration of historic nobility, but there's something stupid and dangerous about wallowing in unearned nostalgia. Inside whichever borders your mother happened to shit you out, you can't claim that history as your own. I don't know—just seems like people will do anything to feel that sombre nobility.

1.6.2. Mum knew all the words to "The Sickbed of Cu Chulainn" and would sing along with it when in company, normally when one of the uncles was present. It was a remnant of her Irish heritage that hadn't been eroded by the drink. I noticed no difference in the degree of pride for figures of fact and figures of fiction.

1.7. Re. faith: The insisted-upon selflessness of the Catholic faith makes sense to me: when I was a boy I used to sleep on the floor, giving up my bed to my teddy bear. Blessed are the meekest, the meeker the better. The sadness and loneliness you feel in the moment of sacrifice...I don't have the words for the pleasure it gives, but Catholicism has played the masochism game wisely. I respect that.

1.7.1. I don't think I've done enough to persuade anyone that Bill is a football fan.<sup>1</sup> I meant to get across how I enjoy football because it allows me to experience hope without having to carry the cross. Some people call it the beautiful game, while others can't contain the boredom it evokes. The reality: it's a device for transferring hope to something external. It's a drug as addictive as stand-up (your happiness is in the brief acceptance of others), sex (your happiness is in the acceptance of one, maybe two), or food or music or cinema or whatever: your happiness is sensory, outwith, consumable. If it doesn't make you happy it's the fault of the thing itself, not you. Even with stand-up: if the crowd doesn't laugh it's because they don't get it.

1.7.2. There's still something lingeringly Catholic about me when it comes to sex – essentially nothing really turns me on unless it feels somewhat debauched.

1.7.3. Blessed are the meek. Then again, the Prodigal Son tells you that you'll probably be fine regardless of how reckless you are. So?

1.7.4. Am I like Job? I've certainly suffered, although I can't say I've suffered particularly well, with much dignity. If suffering is an opportunity then

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<sup>1</sup> See Bill Three and STORYTELLING (dismantling the piping, sabotage?) in the notes to Bill Nine.

perhaps I failed to grasp it, although I don't see why opportunities need to be so obscure.

1.7.5. I had an idea that Bill might be waiting for The Deluge, that he could be wandering about waiting for something to wash him away. Maybe that's why I took him to the canal, even though he initially got lost. Then I think, aren't we all just waiting for the flood? Haven't we always been?

1.7.6. My return to the church left me with a vague absence. I assumed it was god, or lack thereof: maybe he'd gotten sick of people trying Pascal's wager. Then I realised it was mum, and the absence wasn't the negative thing it had first presented itself as but the feeling of freedom or lack of obligation. Strange things happen to people when shorn of their cross.

Mum in church: a nail bomb wrapped in rose petals. Or a potassium coated angel. No, neither of those, but volatile is what I'm saying. I'd stand in fear of her loud scoff when old Father Gilday<sup>1</sup> would give mass, especially during his homilies, which, like Father Drummond's, applied gospel readings to contemporary life. She'd exaggerate a convulsion if Gilday tried to relate the practicalities of the book, especially anything from Matthew: she had it in for him from the first time she read about Jesus making all those pigs commit suicide. Her body would protest the idiocy, cry out and crumple like a child furious at her own tiredness. To be at church as an adult, without the tension and dread of anticipation, without needing to concentrate on what might trigger an outburst, without having to stand as a statue of burning shame in the brief seconds of silence before the priest can carry on... it was actually quite nice once I'd figured out what I was feeling.

Side note: from a mix of television and real life I can identify the look of sexual acceptance a woman might give a man. But I recognise better something less useful: the faces of married men recognising it in my mum, some enjoying the fantasy, others working out the practicalities. I'd like to think she was looking for a father figure but I'm not sure that was the case. Curiously, not one of my uncles was ever recruited from the church. Why were we there?

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<sup>1</sup> Just realised I referenced Father Gilday once or twice in the main text. I should admit that he was part of the inspiration for the imagined sections with the old detective, mainly in terms of the admixture of feelings associated with confession, guilt, penance and something else. These were fairly unsuccessful moments in the story, I think.

1.7.7. A childhood habit carried over from youth to adulthood: upon hearing an emergency siren I'll always silently mouth (then re-mouth) the following: *dear Lord, wherever that/those emergency vehicles are going please may everybody be alright*. It was insisted upon in junior school, which was situated next to a busy road. Almost every day classrooms of thirty-odd little Catholics would solemnly bow their heads and wish for a little good in the world. Of course, when you're told to do something you don't necessarily feel it, but I think we all did feel it back then.

1.8. Re. marriage: two possibilities to consider: will I nurse you into your death or will you nurse me into mine?

1.8.1. Infidelity has a bad press but think about it like this: there's never a soap opera without an infidelity storyline. We can't get enough of it. Any faith in the old detective has to stem from the fact he'd never be unfaithful. Perhaps I should introduce his wife? But should she be an alcoholic whose father abused her or a human rights lawyer who falls for a colleague?

1.8.2. A Raymond Carver story about a man who has champagne and donuts for breakfast—I've tried to read a little Carver every morning before I start writing (Bob Hawk uses that 'no tricks' quotation several times in each of his books). In the story, the character's ex- visits and tries to help him unblock his ear, heating up some oil to loosen the wax clogged up inside. It's a tender detail: she left him because he was deaf to her needs, but she attends to his literal disability. And the champagne and donuts: the juxtaposition, the alcohol an expensive excess, purchased despite cost, in the hope it might be a balm for his loneliness. That's something I've noticed about Carver these mornings: the backstories are in the props, the histories of the cars and glasses and tables and champagne bottles. Globes of wax. But the champagne detail resonated on another level, reminding me of a morning I sat in my kitchen sipping from a bottle of Moët left over from a New Year's Eve party. Mine and Jess's kitchen: sat on a stool at the breakfast bar that bisected our tiny marital kitchen into two unworkable rectangles.

The breakfast bar doubled as a dining table. Jess hated the performance of dining at an actual table. Plus we couldn't afford an actual table, so the breakfast bar became a prop laden with meaning. Or

no: a catalyst, a violent reminder that I had no work, that Jess supported me, that the small inheritance from her mother had dwindled, and the career I'd pursued would offer neither excitement nor comfort.

So we tried to avoid the breakfast bar and its ability to accent the most mundane exchanges. Of course, it was also an implement of psychological torture: it became the object of Jess's gaze when she inquired about my daily activities, had I paid a bill or applied for a job (money was of particular concern: this was a period of my life where I'd watch Jess's glowing face as she switched angrily between online banking accounts. I'd developed a tactic of making her laugh when I knew she was going to stare at the red numbers on the screen. It meant the financial realities would change her mood from pleasant-to-terrible rather than unpleasant-to-oh no. Sadly, the effect was a bit like that Pavlova dog thing: soon enough laughter or amusement of any sort triggered her sense of panic, financial ruin, unbranded goods.) And it was for a few mornings the place I would drink after Jess left for work, before trashing the kitchen, throwing cutlery in every direction, slamming doors, shaking the breakfast bar itself, kicking it, screaming. I once pulled at it so hard it came loose from the wall, its spindly extendable leg damaged in some way so the entire thing sloped dramatically.

The process lasted five or ten minutes each time, before I'd put everything back in its place. The morning of the Moët was the first time it happened, that I lost myself completely.

Jess was never sloppy with her work emails, but one morning after a heavy night of drinking I opened the laptop and saw she hadn't logged off. The morning began, I remember, with me finding a maggot inside the filter of the coffee machine. One and a half maggots, actually: one seeming to have feasted on the other.

Her account had time-logged out: at some point the night before she had evidently tried to write a message. On the screen, eight tantalising black dots occupied the white rectangle beside *password*. When I pressed *sign in* I wasn't shocked. She'd spoken regularly of her boss until a drunken revelation that at a summer office party he had asked her for a kiss, mentioning him no more after that. No shock, exactly, but the kind of stomach churning I associated with inoculations or being sent out of classrooms. My body began to anticipate dread.

This was a Sunday morning. The previous day she had to go to the office to finish work on an audit. When she got home she was pleasant. I remember her telling me the office was eerie, the only other person around was the security guard. Slick and effortless deception.

From the emails I read – despite her merciless culling of household items and especially my collections of stamps, action figures and bits of paper, she was an email hoarder and left plenty to read – the thing itself seemed new and cautious. He was married and twenty years older, a lot to lose. There was playful discussion of “rules”. Something small, hurried, had already occurred; a recent *we can't do this anymore* conversation, always a precursor to infidelity. In fact, read the emails for yourself. I made copies of them immediately, for my own audit. I still have them. They're in descending order, just as I found them:

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**From:** Stalker, Jack G

**To:** Smith, Jessica

**Subject:** Re:

Have a great night.. See you monday.. tomorrow!

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**From:** Smith, Jessica

**To:** Hunter, Jack G

**Subject:** RE:

that was a fast response! I don't have it to send plus I'm sober. Yes we maintained control - just. We could do with the chess board to distract us next time. Decided to go out tonight so I'm locking the laptop away just in case. (such a good job I don't have your mob no).

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**From:** Gatherer, Jack G

**To:** Smith, Jessica

**Subject:** Re:

Hey, you can send it now.

3 hrs alone together today and we behaved. I wish we hadn't.

Jack

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**From:** Smith, Jessica

**To:** Walker, Jack G

**Subject:** RE:

Hope you're not still working?

In basic terms the email I started to write last night was suggesting we brake our rules and some stuff about how I feel - these things are always a good idea after a drink or two.

Enjoy the rest of the weekend!

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**From:** Talker, Jack G

**To:** Smith, Jessica

**Subject:**

Are you going to tell me?

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Our marriage was already a dying thing. My favourite few days each month had become those when Jess was on her period, so I wasn't forced to admit I had no desire for sex. But I was surprised she'd already found an alternative. That they don't come off well in the above – neither showing the tiniest flicker of appeal – isn't much consolation. At the time it added to my frustration, even if the thought of her being fucked bent over the office desk admittedly brought temporary reprieve to the erectile issues I had at the time.

I won't bother you with the other emails. Jess did most of the pursuing, less conscious of corporate IT policy than Stalker. On reflection it was evident: her leaving the room when infidelity occurred on television (perhaps one day I might write something on the omnipresence of infidelity in television, why it's one of the few tropes that keeps people interested); the involuntary recoil when touched; a new vocabulary, replacing *budget* with *allowance*, *laundry* with *tokenism*, changing the words, rewriting my role from artist into loafer: the icy consequences of her convection, her id-ridden, id-drenched office hours. I had been reading up on psychoanalysis. Her limbic system was a cunt.<sup>1</sup>

- 1.8.3. Jess and I had a routine for a while, discussing the previous night's dreams over coffee. She had a machine that ground up coffee beans in a quiet and pleasing way, and the entire mornings would go the way a morning should. If I hadn't dreamt, which I never did during these weeks, I'd make something up. Perhaps she did, too.
- 1.8.4. I'd like to say that, after a while, the most exciting taboo becomes engaging in protected – double-bagged – missionary sex with your own wife, one of those full-circle things you hear about. This is not the case.

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<sup>1</sup> This sort of language makes me come across boorish and unpleasant. I was tempted to delete it, but it's only right to show how low I'm willing to go in the hope I get a cheap laugh. It's a weird fidelity: I couldn't bring myself to change or remove the punchline, but I wasn't brave enough to include it in the main text. Also, I admit my reading of psychoanalysis pretty much came off the back of this revelation.

- 1.8.5. I'd often find her glimpsing at her thighs and looking sad then hopeful, then sad again.
- 1.8.6. Some good advice: don't try to imply your fidelity by acting overly offended when you hear of an acquaintance's infidelity. It tends to lead to suspicion.
- 1.8.7. Perhaps Jess might forgive me. How long can she stoke her own anger? We've both lost, we're both hurt. She's never questioned the existence of love. Might she forgive me?<sup>1</sup>
- 1.9. Re. making mistakes: for the train journey back down south<sup>2</sup> I had three books: Bob Hawk's *How to Read a Book then Write a Better One*, a collection of short-listed poems for an international award, and *Don Quixote*, which I'd read enough about online to begin at the second part. I was next to a window in a four-seater with a table and, as always, sat facing backwards. An older couple sat down opposite me, well-dressed and handsome in their way, with elegant luggage and probably a 30 year-old doctor daughter, the pretty side of plain, who spends a few months a year volunteering in an African country. That sort.
- I was self-consciously turning the pages of *Don Quixote*,<sup>3</sup> confused as to whether I was supposed to take the prologue seriously, when there was a loud smack, the kind of noise that puts me in mind of someone being slapped across the face with a large dead fish, though I've never heard or seen that happen. Something had hit our window and turned it into a kind of map of white cracks, which I recall at the time evoking the description "an essay on the variables of strength and weakness," in my head and must note now to look up the word *variable* to see if it's correct. Also *essay*.
- The couple opposite reacted with a mix of amusement and surprise (I would have called it *bemusement*, as I thought that was the definition of the word. It is not. "If you use a word you're not so sure about, try looking up the definition in an online dictionary, or a dictionary" - Bob Hawk), unflustered

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<sup>1</sup> No recollection – may belong in the inebriated section.

<sup>2</sup> This is in reference to the Transport Museum mentioned early in the story. It's probably worth being clear here: I did indeed visit the museum after Emily's death but, as you might have already surmised, I never went there when Emily was still alive. See Appendix Three for a more thorough going-over of the situation.

<sup>3</sup> I really did make an effort to figure out what this novel malarkey was all about, but nothing ever seemed to offer a clear answer.



and almost happy, as if every occurrence in the world was another example of the wonder of life. At this point I hadn't quite stopped trembling.

The man ran his finger over the pane of glass, which appeared smooth. We passed a cluster of browning pine trees that had missed out on Christmas. He explained, more to me than his wife, who pleasantly mocked him with a dramatic and kind eye roll, how trains have several panels of very hard glass, a vacuum between each, and that it was perfectly safe. He smiled confidently as he said *vacuum* in a way I've since failed to recreate in front of the mirror at home. I've tried to recreate other aspects of his speech, the sense of ease and comfort he instigated in me, as if he'd 'touched' me, as they say, made me feel his important equal. It had something to do with the way he introduced each part of his knowledge, prefacing it with "I've been told," and "according to a young engineer I was speaking to," and "my father once told me," as if the information wasn't his possession but something we could enjoy together. It's not something easily faked.

When his speech came to a natural conclusion he jotted something in a little notepad, tiny cursive squiggles with a tiny pencil. A few minutes later the old lady went to the bathroom, where I was sure her dignity would have to remain at the door. I'd been hoping he'd noticed my reading, been impressed, after his comforting talk, which is a desire I'm certainly too old for but have never managed to shake. He asked about the book of poetry, who won the prize that year, his voice blending almost completely into the train noises. I had no idea, it didn't say. He seemed to doubt me with a different kind of smile that I immediately hated. He asked if I was a poet and I said no, but I was thinking of becoming a writer. I told him nothing of my sadness but hoped it carried in the timbre of my voice. He said something positive, or interesting, or interested, and then said that he had attended a reading by the poet laureate Martha Edge the night before. Or that he once met Martha Edge there, or that he fell off an edge there recently whilst reading poetry. I recalled reading something about a lecture by Martha Edge and Bernard McCall on Irish poetry the following month and said that I was looking forward to hearing her speak. It was actually advertised in an email addressed to Emily, although it took a several days to remember that. He looked dismayed at my comment and muttered something kindly but confused. I realised with embarrassment that I'd caught him out on some sort of lie and suggested he might get tickets for the event. Luckily, his wife returned with two steaming cardboard cups of tea

and he was able to end the conversation without further awkwardness. I mean, the tea inside was steaming,

I bumped into the couple again at the café at Preston station, where we were both changing trains. Standing, he looked like an old man unsure of where the toilet was, but still retaining something of the man who's never doubted where a toilet was, not even once. As I was regretting the now infantile *Mars Bar* I decided to buy, his wife said "Bernard, it's this way." Of course it was Bernard McCall, returning home from his lecture with Martha Edge the previous evening. The lecture was indeed the previous night; the email had given plenty of notice, and the weeks since I saw it had gone by without my knowledge, as if I'd forgotten how time passes. He smiled the same kind smile, as I squeezed the *Mars Bar* in my hand and felt the contents squish beneath the cracked chocolate in figurative concord with my literary ambitions.<sup>1</sup>

- 1.9.1. Jesse James was cool. He once paid a widowed woman who gave him shelter enough money that she could clear her debts. Jazz liked this story, although he mixed it up with *Scarface* by referring to Jesse James as "Scarface," *Scarface* being what he called a lot of people he thought had a good moral compass. Luckily I already knew the story. James waited for the debt collector to leave and then stole the money back. The collector's error is the one every victim makes: he assumed he wasn't under eternal threat. What I like about Jazz is his constant perception of imminent violence. It's also what I fear about Jazz.

## 2. Families

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- 2.1. Re. paternal gifts: mixed in with my mother's possessions was a stack of those flimsy exercise books you tend to get in school, with lined and ruled pages and a nice smelling, almost furry, cover. They belonged to my father: meticulously

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the few occasions I was trying to be a 'writer,' which as I understood it meant adopting a tone you'd never use in actual speech and telling a story that contained pointless details. The only thing going for it is that it's one of the few exchanges I had with anyone new after Emily's death. It reminded me that even when you think your slate is clean you can never quite be anything other than yourself.

handwritten lists, finishing places and times of track events, mostly 800m and 1500m. He included his own name in each, normally placing himself second or third, once first over 800m (Seb Coe second) in 1:37:12 (!). He had to have been in his early thirties when he wrote these, pages and pages, six books full. I see where I inherited my imaginings. I wonder what else he imagined.

2.1.1. Jawline—mother. Nose—mother. Stubby fingers—father. Small ears—father. Tragedy—father (nothing really tragic). Thought patterns haunted by memory of the texture and cadence of Catholic liturgy—mother, also church. Dick—mother. Balls—father. Fate?

2.2. Re. Fathers: the year before she combusted, my mother took me to see him in the hospital. I was prepped: expect a piece of shit. She stayed outside and I could hear her crying. He was steroid-bloated on the bed, like a beached whale if you sort of think of the sea as the hospital floor, which *was* actually a bit damp and slippery and green-blue. The uncovered parts of his legs – between knee and ankle – were two bright white cylinders that looked both many years younger than his face and not particularly human. I could almost see my reflection in them. A tiny television was on the wall above his head, with an extendable (unfortunately not retractable) arm to position it in front of a patient, although always slightly above eye line so he'd have to look up at the screen, as if in reverence to the thing no bigger than his own face.

Curved in a C-shape around his left kneecap was a blood-black surgical scar that seemed to be sucking inwards the skin around it. There was an identical scar on his elbow. It looked as if one of the nurses had filled a pipette with watery milk and squeezed a single droplet onto each of his eyeballs. He kept saying "they give in from underneath, they just bend in on themselves," like I didn't know.

2.2.1. Only one meeting with him, there at the hospital. We spoke about a few things: football, school, his friend who fell off scaffolding and impaled himself close to where we lived. Each opinion felt like a scarred old wound that he'd recall and reveal, abrupt and visible but incrementally fainter, so far from its origin that the logical path that brought one there had long overgrown with weeds. When I think of this I realise that *healing* is a sinister experience. We're never healed, it's only that the scar becomes fainter, the memory more remote.

2.2.2. After a few hours he said “either come on their tits or move towns” after we both silently watched a buxom nurse change his catheter under the bed sheet and walk out of the room. Then he fell asleep. I think he meant that fatherhood is best avoided, or that, if it’s not avoided, a good father might be someone who isn’t biologically related to the child, has no risk of recognising in the offspring the things they never understood about themselves.

2.2.3. He was encased in this dying animal, but his fiery soul shone in his eyes.

<sup>1</sup>

2.2.4. Dad worked as a mechanic. Before that he drove long haul. Before that he was in the army. He joined to see the world, but spent most of his time as a prison guard in Ireland. His mother paid for his early release after something went wrong with his ear. She died a few months after he got married and he became a bitter little faggot as a result. He had a hairy chest. He had strong legs. He was a piece of evil faggot shit. He looked like me when I was crying, which was bad. Once he looked like me when I was mopping up Blue Nun from the carpet, which I think was good. He knew a good joke, something about Jews. That’s it.

2.3. Re. Mothers: I’ve only recently realised what a talented manipulator my mother was in the early years. An example: when it came to food, it was never “what would you like,” or “do you want chips,” but “do you want chips on the yellow plate or the plate with the train;” “do you want your milk in the Superman mug or the cowboy mug?” Cleverly removing actual choice. I’m reminded of this whenever I prepare a meal for the dog.<sup>2</sup> When I tried it with Jess she looked at me like “the fuck?” I don’t have the knack.

2.3.1. When I was six or seven she tried a little, a small amount, to be the thing that was expected. She was boiling a kettle full of water on a gas stove for a hot water bottle, to fill one for me, to keep her baby warm in bed at night, the baby who would wake up with frozen-crusts on his upper lip in the winter mornings, bedroom windows jammed with ice, a hot water bottle for little man to keep him from death, the purest sort of instinct, and when it caught, the kettle, on the ridge of the grate of the

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<sup>1</sup> What utter shite. Whenever I try really hard to be a writer is when I’m most reminded I have no talent.

<sup>2</sup> One of a few dog comments I cut from the notes to Bill Six. They seemed a little trivial in comparison to my possibly profound ruminations on time, plus it was yet another occasion where the slippage between Bill and I was unhelpful.

gas hob, when the kettle caught and spouted out a steaming boiling water that landed directly on her little man's foot, her scream was loudest, registering shock before the little man, before his little brain began to understand. And afterwards she pressed a cool damp cloth on little man's foot, soothing him, telling him that no, no, mummy didn't drop the water but baby dropped it, baby knocked it, baby's fault but it's okay, mummy forgives baby, baby's fault not mummy's, remember that, remember not to say or if say say baby's fault for knocking mummy and not mummy's fault. The house was cold and grey and she was alone in it with her little man.

- 2.3.2. The things I had to remember: keep the footstool by the toilet; no cups or glasses around her feet; tins of beans and other non-perishables in the cupboard; keep away when she begins humming Connie Francis's 'My Happiness'.
- 2.3.3. Mum's living room was appropriately Catholic-baroque: icon-infested, gaudy, cluttered, and at odds with the nylon sheen of the sofa and chairs. To move to the kitchen was to dispense with any art-history lineage, skipping rococo, romantic and impressionist, settling somewhere between cubism, late cubism and neoplasticism.<sup>1</sup> The back garden, a few stone slabs, looked like a Turner through the filthy window.
- 2.3.4. Despite common sentiment, employment for mum wasn't exactly a blessing. It was a gut-punch, actually, when she'd be moving quickly around the house, loudly opening and closing drawers and cupboard doors, wearing something other than her stain-stiff towel dressing gown and looking for fuck knows: the usual routine for the first morning of a new job. People can find comfort inside their hopelessness. Despite what you're told, an absence of hope isn't all that bad. One gets into a routine. But when hope comes along you're like so where's the failure? And when mum could afford to drink outside the house the failures were in public. *The Goblin*, owned by an ex-footballer who retired before there was much money in the sport, was the stage for her own ignominies. We can be singular or plural with that word, there were many but they were all the same: mum and one of the uncles, him holding her by the wrists, stone-faced, head flung back from her claws. She'd always be screaming. Sometimes they'd be screaming, too. The root of the argument almost immediately drowned in its own words.

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<sup>1</sup> It took less than three minutes to research the chronology of art history online.

Everybody became a bystander,<sup>1</sup> a few streets that all looked onto the pub car park that never once contained a car. This was the era when AD became CE even in Irish Catholic communities, and there was at least one young boy on any street with a Sony Walkman cassette player clipped to his elasticated waistband, listening to Guns n' Roses or Metallica through earphones that looked too big then and would look too small now.

The new job, after a few weeks, became an old job, an abridged book of injustices among many similar editions in the library of her internal life. Not that we had books at home.

2.3.5. She got very interested in computers for a while in the early 90s. For a week and a half she worked inputting book reference numbers into an electronic system at the city library. Most of the women who worked with her liked to go to the pub afterwards, and it was a good ten days. Main Uncle was tending to his anus in some unknown place around this time and I got to hear a few nice stories of my real dad when she came home bleary. Anyway, computers seemed to interest her. She'd say—and say it a lot, enough that I mention it—that “your mind's like a computer, it stores things forever.” She'd lose a little of the eloquence when she'd try to describe the disparity in ease of access between the two machines. I think she meant to lament the brain's lack of a simple search function, or a reliable storage location, when she said “God was a stupid little bastard.”

2.3.6. The reasons for mum's spontaneous combustion are nebulous.

2.4. Re. the parents of others: the last time I met Jess and Emily's father can fairly be described as the end period of his life, a double-ebb with no swash. He was living in a sparse ex-council one bedroom flat in South London, a kind of anti-home where even the carpets and cupboard doors seemed hostile. He'd apparently upset his two little girls by buying the flat outright with the last of their mother's estate a few years earlier. He seemed fine when I met him, aside from declining to acknowledge me. I mean, he was miserable, ugly, joyless, but I was familiar with those qualities. I suppose he no longer engaged in one of his favourite activities upon seeing me—shaking my hand then shaking his head.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of the bystander, you might remember, was something that interested me in the original text as well. Again here, it's a kind of power, albeit one that requires a great deal of abnegation to attain.

But he wasn't eating his own shit is what I'm saying. Maybe he wasn't eating well but he was shitting normally, as far as I could tell. Or nothing smelled of shit. I think that's the point—no shit smells mean probably things aren't completely terrible, that a young daughter doesn't necessarily have to dedicate a significant amount of her life to caring for her father. But she did anyway. And he died less than a month later, not from the cancer that had been feeding on his prostate, but from a massive stroke. Emily was absent from this period. As for Jess—a carer doesn't just stop caring. Not right away, at least.

- 2.4.1. I met Jess and Emily's father several times, all but the first time in the cramped shithole flat in Brockley he refused to leave. I was never convinced he was as far gone as Jess insisted: he seemed to take far too much pleasure in calling me "absent of gorm". Or rather took pleasure in getting away with it.
- 2.4.2. Jess's father spoke more tenderly of Emily, the absent daughter. Jess, always in the present, was dismissed: tedious, negative, and poor company. Emily had the good sense not to try to prove her love.
- 2.4.3. We'd been together for a few months when Jess introduced me to the family at her mother's wake. Her father was preoccupied by a long telephone call in the hallway for the majority of my time there and, when he finished, mostly eyeballed a guy who turned out to be balling his wife just before she died. The television was playing mutely in the corner, black and white for some reason, the news reporting on Clinton denying balling his intern. I was pretending not to be balling Jess, pretending not to be fantasising about balling Emily, who was more beautiful than her sister even under the running brown mascara, and pretending not to notice their younger brother, his sullen countenance like a static identity, an orbit of misery and awkward silence,<sup>1</sup> his mixed-race a kind of punchline considering the occasion. Balling was not a concern of his. The more interesting older brother – the success, already a father of three, each child with a different mother – was fulfilling the role of absent son.

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<sup>1</sup> I liked that description when I first wrote it, and I still think it's accurate. But it was the reason I scrapped the entry: as I became a little more eloquent with my writing (I've noticed writing a novel is good practice for writing) I realised the good sentences made all the others look even worse.

- 2.5. Re. Non-parents: I finished masturbating.<sup>1</sup> In another window on the PC, I was playing the film adaptation of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*.<sup>2</sup> It was close to the start, just as Michelle shoots up in the kitchen as Fuck Head's eating cereal and there's some cartoon playing on the TV on the breakfast table. The PC is an old one, struggling and wheezing when asked to multi-task. All of Michelle's movements are stuttering. Whenever I come I feel weak, and the idea of the needle made me more squeamish than usual. I was glad that the director ultimately chose not to show it. I wondered if Johnson had omitted it, too.

I went to get another drink and must've been a while: when I returned to the computer it was the part where Michelle was going in for the abortion and Fuck Head watches a vasectomy movie. It was a different story altogether. I thought that was clever, how Johnson or the director had said so much about the choice to bring another life into the world, while seemingly saying nothing about it at all. It was good to see it in pictures. It spoke near exactly to my own situation, except Jess hadn't gone through with the abortion. She miscarried, but we were stupid enough to get pregnant again only a month later. She miscarried again, the second time carrying the dead fetus around inside her for over a month. I couldn't think of a good joke, although at the time I disagreed with her vague definition of "good".

- 2.6. Re. Parental power: I've thought about the upcoming statement for several years and, despite feeling like I should, I've found no good reason to reject it: I wish one of my uncles had sexually assaulted me when I was a child. Raped, I mean. I know what you'll say: even saying such a thing trivialises the reality for those who've gone through it. But here's my thinking: I'm a tough individual, psychologically speaking. I don't cope because I don't need to: I'm barely affected by the things that happen externally. I'm certain I'd be no more damaged now if one of my mother's lovers had slipped it to me when I was

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<sup>1</sup> I'm sorry but it really does happen to be an important aspect of my existence.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Hawk quotes several writers but he only explicitly recommends reading two: Raymond Carver and Denis Johnson. As I mentioned, I read some Carver, but I never got around to reading much Johnson. The film made me think that I'd probably have enjoyed the book, if I hadn't already seen the film. Not to say I didn't even bother to crack open the book—I did, and two moments resonate: one is the bit where Fuck Head is working in Beverly Care Home and remarks that looking at some of the residents makes you think god must be a "senseless maniac." I thought that was a good line I wished I'd thought of myself. The other thing was a simple sentence that came towards the end of a different story: "Generally the closest I ever came to wondering about the meaning of it all was to consider that I must be the victim of a joke." The issue with both writers is that, although interesting, neither spoke to me in any real way, or at least not in any way I could use. Maybe I could be like the British version of one of them, substitute bourbon for tea and transient employment/romance for the gentle irony of a revolutionless society.



little. And the bonus would be a life-long excuse for absolutely everything I did. I don't mean to be insensitive here. I understand many people suffer terribly as adults because of this kind of stuff. I just mean, for me personally, I can see some benefits.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Death and Dying

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3.1. Re. Ending: In the aftermath of suicide everything is freighted with new meaning. Memory's quarry is sensibility, which winds and whips through unfamiliar corridors, drops through hidden trapdoors and into rooms so well concealed it is difficult to believe the little tableaux they contain are true. Each recollection is now an aching metal wire, coiled in the stomach, immutable yet unspooling, pulling unremittingly downwards, towards a new cavern or pit or other subterranea with its own unique gravity. Your post-orgasm is guiltier. The sentimental acquires a new resonance.

3.1.1. Here's what I've learned: suicides bequeath something to everyone they leave. It's weight. Every memory of the suicide is freighted with a new meaning: that they had an altogether deeper shit going on than you knew. You feel duped, shallow, hollowed, a fool of no importance. You were not enough for them to stay living. You feel insignificant. And an insistent little nag – a rogue neuron like a dumb, hyper bluebottle at a window – buzzes around your mind, its quarry sensibility. And the little fucker does not stay still. One second it's doing laps around your brain stem making your chest bump like something or other, the next it's in your cortex, bouncing against the precious heart-shaped box where you keep the time... oh, say the time you came inside her and looked up to see tears in her eyes. Boy did you get that wrong. And on occasion it

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<sup>1</sup> Do I really feel this? I go back and forth but mostly I think yes, I do. If I'm honest with myself I'd privilege the ability to excuse oneself of almost anything over a happy childhood. Although, if I'm reading Freud correctly, it's unlikely I can ever truly be completely honest with myself, which is a little depressing. Still, this is a cowardly omission from the story: I believe it but am too worried people will be disgusted with me for saying it. So why stick it here? Perhaps, tucked away as it is, I could never envisage anyone ever reading it.

lands on your pituitary gland, dropping a perfect micro-shit that leaves your body with as much bloodflow as a sponge.

3.1.2. After the suicide of a loved one there are two of you: the outer one that resembles you in reflection, and the inner one whose quarry is sensibility, that does nothing other than try to figure out what happened, what was missed and what could've been done. Two of you: your shell, a husk underneath which your heart beats despite itself; and the new addition, a kind of inept detective to whom every detail is a clue that leads nowhere.<sup>1</sup>

3.1.3. I'd read accounts. Or more accurately I was aware of them: people being technically dead for a minute or a few seconds, the experience of a bright light, a beckoning hand, and a warm chill. I've always found it very easy to dismiss those narratives, which don't seem too different from cloudy heavens, fiery hells and grey, wide-eyed aliens. One rarely gives the brain credit for what it remembers from television. But I struggled with something. She was dead, a fact dated between the hours of one and six PM. But what about the minute? The second? The moment? There had to be a limen, a sliver of transition, something that refused fixed binaries. And a sliver is what I saw: a thin line of black quivering on an infinite canvas of white, where the limitations of my imagination bluntly announce themselves, like as a child trying and failing to conceive infinite nothingness.<sup>2</sup>

3.2. Re. Reconfiguration: It was only after I learned that she'd killed herself that I looked back on her emails and considered the depth of her sadness. And how she turned: a flat character into something so much more interesting, then into a perfect tragedy. That's what it takes.

3.2.1. It was only after she'd killed herself that the seriousness and triviality of what I'd been doing became apparent, how serious and how ridiculous the whole thing was from her side and mine respectively, compared to how it had seemed before.

3.2.2. Only after she killed herself did it seem serious.

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<sup>1</sup> It's difficult to get the words right sometimes, especially when you're so convinced you've found the perfect metaphor you bend it to breaking point, or twist it into something unrecognisable, or fuck it up.

<sup>2</sup> Granted, the sliver could've been my spermy eye issue.

3.2.3. Only after Bill saw her hanging, did the seriousness, the weight, become apparent.

3.2.4. How serious, how heavy, it all was, afterwards.

3.2.5. When Bill saw her hanging bluishly, shit got real.<sup>1</sup>

3.3. Re. The Deathbed: Both my mum and dad lay for a while in their respective deathbeds. My dad died in his, a hospice bed that was made for death and bore the death of many before and after. Mum defied the liver doctors and left her deathbed alive, transferred herself to a deathchair nobody knew to visit. The deathbed is a performance for the living, the dying cast as zoo animals, dying zoo animals that are lying down. When we go so long pretending we're immortal the deathbed seems an impolite final scene. I think mum knew this, too.

3.3.1. For some reason I expected the deathbed to be a dignified and eloquent place, but experience has proven otherwise.

3.3.2. My father died some moment between night and morning the day after my visit. I left after realising his last long silence had turned into sleep. Just before, he stirred and murmured something. I've always thought he wanted to share an image or memory with me that he'd never done before: something about the way his hand moved toward me like a child getting a parent's attention, as if he realised with panic there were things in his mind that would vanish with him.

3.4. Re. Transubstantiation: people take issue with those nut Catholics who think they actually eat the flesh and drink the blood, but it's really not all that strange. Is wafer into flesh any stranger than flesh into money (a worker) or money into flesh? When Bill held Emily's book in his hand is it so strange to think he was holding her?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, these rather mundane ruminations didn't last long as potential contenders for the main text. They may be of interest solely for the reason that their lack of originality spurred on the considerations of the [ADVICE FOR PEOPLE GRIEVING/MOURNING A SUICIDE](#) entries in part one.

<sup>2</sup> I thought for so long about the function of the cracked spine of the book it never occurred to me to dig deeper into this idea

- 3.5. Re. Repetition: two times, for each parent, it happens the same way: the funeral home manager opens a ring binder and slides it across the table. There's one laminated page, four pixelated pictures of coffins. Both times you choose the walnut, because you've always liked the word and because the brass handles on each side of the box look the most vivid. At that age you don't think too much about other ways to bury the dead. The options given are the standard ones, limited, religious even when not. You don't realise it, but you're making decisions: "Was he/she Catholic? There is a crematorium in the parish. Is cremation best? Do you still wish to have the walnut?" You say yes to all, thinking you're merely being polite. The repetition is so strong you forget to ask, or are too scared to mention, your mother's wish to not be buried with that bastard. She ends up scattered in the same soil as that bastard.
- 3.6. Re. Cleansing of Lepers: At the end of my first mass in many years, Drummond made an announcement about a 'coffee morning' in the church social club. It sounded like he planned to attend. The 'social club' was annexed to the main church building, same pale grey brick and thin carpet, a kind of dullness that's endemic and can't be fixed by lighting. Almost the entire congregation aside from one or two young families shifted themselves from one room to another, shedding a little of their pious rigidity around the shoulders and neck that I think comes from the idea of bearing a wooden cross. The fat bald man I'd been pewed up with, who smelled of unwashed scrotum from eight feet away, was the first to the gingerbread biscuits fanned out on a paper plate next to two large urns containing hot water. Technically there was coffee, but only the granulated sort in the little plastic sachets you find in hotels. Why am I bothering with such pointless details? The main thing is that fat bald man, who is standing at the edge of a circle of five others, two couples and another man who seemed to be talking about his wife having recently given birth. They were all handsome, at least in the hale, healthy and well-dressed way. Very attractive compared to the fat bald man, anyway, who stood removed both physically and metaphysically, by a few feet and an historic familial line. I'm stood further away, in earshot and side-eyeshot, looking out the window at the cluster of crooked gravestones – that remind me of my bad teeth<sup>1</sup> – and the expanse of green beyond that will eventually be home to more. I'm an anonymous observer, invisible aside from when someone reaches around me to get a coffee

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<sup>1</sup> I'm certain this isn't an original thought but I have no idea where it came from.

sachet or one of those thin plastic stirring sticks. I noticed one member of the circle of five, the solo husband who'd nipped out to praise Jesus for his latest little miracle, well, no, what I noticed was that I can't tune out the conversations of others: nothing is more interesting than the interactions I'm not involved in. But the solo husband, his pleasant face and powder blue jumper, somehow he'd brought the fat bald man into the conversation. I was wondering whether they could smell his scrotum. I mean, why not wash it? Anyway, they get onto the topic of ages, how old they all are, and solo husband correctly guesses fat bald man's age at 32, which visibly disappointed him (the fat man): evidently he'd gotten used to people assuming he was older than his years because of his appearance – the emphatic baldness and shine of the pate; lumpen pockets of sad, angry flesh under his eyes; the proletariat of pockmarks channelling his cheeks; a stoop that was a general sort of downcastness, as if each part of his body, which was large in every way, was working to get as close as possible to the floor – and could find some enjoyment in their surprise that he was actually younger than they guessed: the kind of transient enjoyment you might feel after a self-serviced orgasm, the big black sadness behind it. But his age being correctly guessed, his youth identified, was particularly painful: in a quick physical summing up, someone was attentive enough to add together the un-greyled laurel of light brown hair that curved around the base of his skull like a punch line, the smooth, blushing face, the little nervous tics that were tended to by a youthful shame, and see him for what he was. In short, someone very quickly called out not just his age but also his lot.<sup>1</sup>

- 3.7. Re. The little death: I've never had a wet dream. My first orgasm was about two thirds of the way through an episode of the American sitcom *Cybill* starring Cybill Shepherd as 'Cybill,' playing a formerly successful actress currently out of vogue. It might have been one of the first mainstream shows to skirt the fiction/reality divide in such an overt way, I don't know or care. Anyway, I'd been masturbating for a good 20 minutes, so I was close to the end of the show. There was a definite urge to finish, although I didn't understand what "to finish"

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<sup>1</sup> I recall this entry took a while to compose, and I was never satisfied with it. I was thinking a lot about the downcast, the downtrodden, but this is one of the very few times I wrote about it. I was too consumed with the story, although I guess some of my thoughts were written into Bill's character. The main reason I never included it, of course, was that I failed to cleanse the leper: I merely observed his filth. He's here in this section simply because he passed away before the following week's mass. Drummond announced it, a massive heart attack. Perhaps the saddest part is that his lot allows such an easy shift in categorisation, from one thing to another with no resistance. Although I suppose that's true of everyone.

might've meant: the word "wanker" was being used frequently in school, combined with hand gestures (which proved helpful), but I really had no idea. Still, something told me I had to carry on, speed up in fact, so *something* would happen before I got to the end of the sitcom, the full-circle turn that leaves all the characters back where they were ready to start again the following week. It felt like that ending was somehow the antithesis of what I was doing. And then I came, right as Maryann was saying something disparaging about 'Dr Dick'. It was slightly painful and almost too good to enjoy. The smell was both new and familiar.<sup>1</sup>

3.7.1. After the first, my following thirty orgasms were to a black and white picture of a woman in a bikini in the back pages of a copy of Pro Wrestling Illustrated. There's a good chance she's dead now. Captured in pixelated grey-scale she seemed sort of dead even back then.

## 4. The Art of Fiction

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4.1. Re. Openings: In my mania I wrote a novel. That's a nice opening line, I think: untrue, but snappy. Or is it one of those grandiose or bombastic first sentences that are laughably immature? In my state of ennui I composed a little novella, old chap. Oh I tossed off a few thoughts recently, during my malady.

This is my second attempt. My first, *Ballottement*, was a 100,000 word novel that, after re-drafting, became a haiku, yet to be published.

I'm not good enough to write the kind of book where things slowly unfold, where meaning is withheld until it fits neatly into the hollow the writer has expertly constructed. I'd like to think this was a choice, that my next paragraph, which might be a lumpen one of exposition (I haven't decided!), is an aesthetic stand against novelistic conceits that attempt to manipulate a reader. It is not.

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<sup>1</sup> You might wonder why this entry is placed in the death section. My reason is to suggest that perhaps the 'little death' one experiences after an orgasm isn't a transient thing: that maybe my first orgasm was the end of something good and pure, the first of thousands of deaths that each killed a tiny part of me. It might've been wise to mention this before all my masturbation references, to give them the shade of seriousness that comes with self-murder.

Ah but ah, ha ha. See what I did there, above? I made fun of myself for your amusement. Dramatic Irony: Checkhardt, page 144. I should delete it, but what if I couldn't? What if everything was recorded, documented, impossible to wipe away? What if every single thing you say is included in the sum that determines your worth?

And the humour is too television-y. Like sitcom stuff: like a fairly well-written sitcom joke, where we laugh at someone for being a bit more stupid than us, but laugh in a harmless sort of way, and are perhaps reminded of a friend or associate who is equally as naïve or ill-equipped to deal with the complicated nature of modern life. Or maybe we laugh because we hear the canned laughter filtered through, and we don't want to be left out, caught not laughing at something. So maybe you didn't laugh at my little joke because of the absence of canned laughter; or perhaps you don't find laughing at someone's naivety very enjoyable. Or maybe you didn't get it: it just flew right by because all this isn't very engaging, or because you only happen to be flicking through the first few pages of this book to see if it's the right one for you. Or maybe you, my imagined reader, who is female, pretty, sitting alone somewhere hoping to be absorbed in this thing you're reading, have stopped reading, stopped back when I began my rumination on the first sentence, which I see now is prematurely placed in the text. And if you have stopped... well then these words don't exist. If there's nobody reading these words then they haven't been written, and I am not typing them right now. And maybe you aren't that pretty after all, or even female.

- 4.1.1. Night has an odd companion, a cool-air silence that belies the truth there is never nothing happening. Bill waits for the sound of Emily's footsteps as she comes closer to turning the corner, then he can start walking. The street is quiet. The rain lands lightly on his face, in his hair. He doesn't want to talk, only to be close to her. But tonight the footsteps do not come.
- 4.1.2. Broken by dew's weight, the strands of a spider web flirt with the sun while the coffee heats, steaming under the window, storming at the pane. Bill rubs his face with both hands, broken man style. "Oh, Emily," he wails. The dog immediately imitates the sound and then becomes excited by it, as it is the same sound she makes when she wants to go to the toilet. The old detective looks surprised. Bill brings him a cup of hot coffee, black. "So tell me what you were doing there," says the detective. The dog wails for the toilet once more.

4.1.3. His eyes open: the liminal seconds where he is nobody, where there is only brightness and heaviness and the softness of birth. Quickly, suddenly, he becomes himself: an uncountable number of memories, sensations and associations assemble, reassemble. But even those few seconds, perfectly empty, are familiar to him now: they are the moment before he is him, and therefore must just be another part of him. He is Bill.

4.2. Re. word choices: A felcher is someone who sucks up his own semen after ejaculating it into someone else. A filcher is someone who steals inexpensive things. The latter is close, but neither of them is the word I'm looking for. A mulcher is someone who spreads mulch on or over something. A *moocher* is almost right; the American definition at least. But the British definition is 'loiterer,' which is incorrect. I'm only a mooch in America. *Freeloader* is closest, but that applies to someone who 'takes advantage of others' generosity without reciprocation'. Where the definition fails is in its omission of *instigation*. A real freeloader instigates others' generosity. And it's an art. All Woody Allen voice.<sup>1</sup>

4.2.1. Acceptable insults: go fuck yourself can be used for either gender, as can ass/arsehole; phallic references are better than vaginal, but both should almost always be swerved if we're interested in real equality; no animals, generally, although 'pig,' if used, should only ever be for a man

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<sup>1</sup> This is me working out what the correct term is for a certain type of manipulative dishonesty that I attempted to describe. The discarded entry was part of the notes to Bill Two and went as follows: Despite wanting to, I couldn't have Bill steal one of the bicycles lying in the street. A bike chase scene would have been easier to write than a walking-and-nothing-happening scene, but it doesn't really seem like a Bill thing to do. Plus I've never stolen anyone's property before, not even a pencil in school. I'd be writing the scene with absolutely no knowledge or experience of it, which is frowned upon by Bob Hawk. I am, however, an expert leech. If I can be of no other use let me at least tell you the secrets of leeching, which are two-fold. Firstly, one has to be okay with being a leech. This is a tricky moral ground, and it helps if you naturally resent anyone who has more than you, even (or especially) if they are a close friend or family member. The second secret is more subtle: don't make any leechy first moves. Nobody ever sees a leech coming towards them, right? They only notice it when it's on them, sucking away. One should never beg or plead poverty in order to be a successful leech. One must instead keep up the furious pretence of dignity, emphatically refusing a bite of the sandwich your friend eats across the restaurant table (but why was he in the restaurant anyway, not ordering? your friend will only think to wonder much later), and defiantly thrusting the bank note back into the hand of your other friend (or the same one). Also, it is useful if, when you finally back down to charity as if *you* are the generous one, you privately resent the smug selflessness that is sloshing in your benefactor's stomach, thickening your resolve to more passionately and obstinately reject further offers of generosity, which will be increasingly substantial. I'd make Bill a leech, but he doesn't really seem the type.



and never a woman, although never if, again, equality is your thing; MORE MORE MORE – we'll unfortunately never get back to a point where 'idiot' had real power outside of a learning disability context. "I hope you die" works, although only if you avoid appearing sarcastic.

- 4.2.2. I hope it's not too much of an issue that Bill doesn't speak, that I speak for him. The words he might use are beyond the limits of my imagination. Hmm, it's a shame 'beyond the limits of my imagination' sounds like a cliché.<sup>1</sup>
- 4.2.3. *Killing* time is an odd phrase, isn't it? How such a dramatic term refers to doing very little, inconsequential. It's perverse that we cry about the brevity of life yet still find so many crevices of time to be killed, murdered. If your time is your own, is killing time a kind of suicide? Probably not, but I'm still wary of the phrase.<sup>2</sup>
- 4.2.4. Baskets: there's also *basket case*, I suppose. And if you're in a basket you might not know there's an opening at the top, making it seem more like a cage.<sup>3</sup>

- 4.3. Re. Engaging with the audience: Bob Hawk suggests a good way to make a reader care is to put your character into a dangerous situation.<sup>4</sup> The best I've been able to do with Bill is make him faint. Perhaps he'll hit his head. When I think of real danger I go back to a childhood memory of being chased. I'm walking home one night from a friend's house and I see a group of boys across the street. I keep my head down in the hope they'll not notice me passing. Forgive the shift into present tense—ever noticed how the dramatic moments never quite become memories? So I'm walking and suddenly a glass bottle shatters at my feet. The boys laugh and I walk on without breaking my stride. I think it's over, until I hear another clink of glass behind me. [Tense shift] Whatever happened I've never been able to figure out, but it's assumed by the boys that I'd thrown the glass back at them, and they responded by chasing me down the street. [Tense shift] I start to run, frustrated that by fleeing I'm accepting their judgement of my guilt. But what else can I do? I run hard,

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<sup>1</sup> I think this is in reference to Bill Eight, Bill's discussion with the old detective. This was a period (week) in my life where I was struggling quite badly with how I was supposed to understand Bill.

<sup>2</sup> A deleted entry from notes to Bill Six, where I wished to say a lot more on time than I managed.

<sup>3</sup> Notes on Bill Five, STORYTELLING (the presence of baskets, no metaphor or symbolism)

<sup>4</sup> Looking back, I notice several occasions in the main text where I reference the anxiety of making sure you, reader, care about the people in the story. Perhaps I'm overly sensitive to the manipulations necessary in fiction. And I realise I have no idea if I was ever successful in getting anyone to care.

pumping my arms, but I feel them gaining ground, shortening the distance too quickly. I turn left into a side street and begin criss-crossing through alleyways until their galloping sound becomes fainter. I climb into a bin and cover myself with a lid, trying not to gasp too loudly or think about the wet things inside. The air is thick and foul, each gulp almost makes me vomit. I hear the footfall of the boys pass by, but I stay in the bin anyway, returning home the following morning to a house absent of worry. Later that week I heard those boys took out their frustrations on some other kid, someone who could easily have been me. I think about him a lot. I think I envy him. They named an award in his honour, although I've never understood what was honourable about him.

I've tried to give this story to Bill, but it's proving to be a physical impossibility. Inertia overcomes me any time I start to type the first sentence. I become immediately tired and have to sleep. It's probably a good thing.

- 4.4. Re. setting the scene: Emily hangs in the middle of the room like a work of art. Jess, still crying, seems unable to take her hands from her face. The female officer sits beside her, almost consoling. The male officer is speaking to a colleague over radio comm. Bill waits for people to remember him, realise he should not be there.
  - 4.4.1. The cord around Emily's neck is still squeezing her in death. Bill wishes they would take her down. The detective is saying something to him but is being drowned out by Jess's crying. Is he asking how Bill got inside? Bill tries to answer but cannot think what to say, opens his mouth and closes it again.
  - 4.4.2. Jess lunges at Bill and has to be restrained by both the male and female officer. The old detective instructs them to take her out of the room. Emily's body is naked and waxy. Her face is grey and blue, bloated and bulging. Tiny imbricated wafers of dead skin flower at the corners of her mouth, seeming more alive than everything else. The old detective asks why Bill entered the property, if he expected to find this. Bill begins to cry quietly, his hands shake and, without knowing why, he kneels on the floor as if in genuflection. There's something... an angel, a unicorn? A white mass flashes in his periphery. When he opens his eyes he is face down on the floor. Each officer takes an armpit and raises him up: he is Jesus down from the cross, Jesus on the cross, then Jesus on the sofa.
  - 4.4.3. Why, said Jess. What the fuck, said Jess. Why the fuck are you here, said Jess. What the fuck are you doing here, said Jess.

4.5. Re. the function of comedy: stand-up comedy is a false democracy: one assumes the laughter of a room is the acknowledgement of a community forged in agreement, purely democratic. But what if one insincere laugh provokes imitation? Laughter is infectious, after all. An artificial consensus isn't hard to come by.

4.5.1. A lot of comedians don't really laugh at jokes. They see them coming, recognise a familiar rhythm or structure that makes the actual words irrelevant. They're thinking too much about a funnier response. There are other reasons, too, I suppose.

I'm being totally honest when I say I've only laughed a genuine laugh on three occasions in my entire life. I've feigned laughter many times, sometimes so successfully that I almost get caught up in the fakery and start to laugh honestly at the artifice of my own laughter before I'm able to pull myself back together—laughter's infectious, after all. But the three true laughs of my lifetime are as follows:

- Main Uncle imitating Stevie Wonder on stage looking for his microphone;
- Grace on webcam, drunk, talking about having to sleep in the same bed as her grandmother, attempting to fist herself and falling face first onto her bed as I watched, erection in hand;
- and after Emily died, getting home from the police station in the early hours of the morning and sitting at the kitchen table, feeling complete and total loneliness, the dog shyly coming up to me with a dish cloth in her mouth, dropping it at my feet, daring me to grab it before she did.

Each of these times I laughed past tears, into convulsions, beyond control of my body. For whatever reason, they all created an identical feeling, a kind of absence, actually, of absolutely everything.

4.6. Re. Children's fiction: although Jess's and Emily's father had no investment in the present moment, Jess could get him to talk about the past. Their childhood in South Africa, mostly, where their mother taught art and literature and their father did something obscure, something blood-tinted. She could get him to tell

stories she'd heard many times before, about playing with Emily in the yard or the weekend shopping trip in Durban where the toddler twin sisters kept stealing cosmetic items and slipping them into their father's trouser pocket. She was never happier. Her pleasure was in knowing; tucking up inside the familiar sentences, enjoying the turns she knew were about to come. She was in love with the stories of her past, but only if they were told by him.

4.6.1. Jess liked to hear stories, to let someone else remind her of the patterns and textures she already knew. Emily liked to tell them, story after story, expecting not familiarity but somehow something new, something different each time.

4.6.2. My favourite piece of writing from school was a poem we studied that I don't remember very well. It had a bird in it, I recall, but that wasn't the most memorable thing. Or it was, but shouldn't be. There was a concentration camp guard who finished his shift and walked home, stopping at a shop to buy sweets for his children, the scent of death still lingering on him. And there was a Jew in the camp, doing something nasty, stealing the shoes of another prisoner maybe. Or something worse. I suppose it's not a profound thing to notice – that things are a little more complicated than 'good' or 'bad' – but I've always thought that's what any writing should be helping us work out.

4.7. Writing Exercises: "Character, like sense of place and dialogue, is the most important thing in fiction. You gotta know your characters inside out, back to side, and all the way around. Here's how you get acquainted: stick them in an empty room and watch what they do. Wait around—you have the time. Don't rush them—let them dally and dither and dawdle. What are they doing? When they start surprising you you're ready to take them for a walk." Bob Hawk, *DAWW*, p3

4.7.1. Bill in an empty room: The room is empty, apart from Bill. It's really quite empty indeed, like a bucket without a thing in it. But there's a bit of carpet. No, the entire floor is carpeted in a thin grey stiff fabric that evokes the emptiness of an office with nothing in it, apart from a bit, a kind of tuft in the corner, curling away from the corner in fact, pointing towards Bill. Bill's in the room, not an office, although I suppose it *could* be an office—impossible to say. No, there are no electrical sockets on the walls. But then why the grey office carpet? Forget all that: Bill is in a

completely empty room, the floor, ceiling and walls all a blank grey stone that's smooth and unmarked. He's pretty still. I get that I'm supposed to be writing about Bill here, but I should add there's a light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Dangling almost like there was someone here before. But there wasn't. I suppose Bill's looking up at the bulb. Yes, he walks over to it and tentatively touches it with his fingers, stills it. It's warm but not hot, recently turned on. He looks around at the blank walls, up again at the light bulb, down at his hands, his feet and legs. Let's say there's a chair.<sup>1</sup>

4.7.2. The old detective in an empty room. <sup>2</sup>

4.8. Re. The Imagination: My imaginings almost always involve me performing on a stage, whether it be music, comedy or, rarely, drama. To be celebrated is, I suppose, my desire, but also to be distant, removed, slightly above. If I'm reading Freud correctly this particular predilection doesn't exist, and yet it does!

4.8.1. I'm a professional wrestler starting out in the Tri-State promotion in the mid-eighties, possibly hailing from Trenton, NJ (look up Trenton, NJ). 6'1" 225lbs, with a Greco-Roman background and a fast, high-flying set of manoeuvres. Makes big impression as a babyface, gets picked up by AWA and gets some heat jobbing to top heels. Has short stints with both NWA and WWF around 88-89, quitting both promotions after becoming disillusioned with the bookings. Spends the next 2-3 years working heel characters between Japan and Mexico (CMLL in Mex, IWGP or New Japan Pro in Japan – look up), developing extreme high-flying/high-impact style along with lucha libre sensibility. Transfers to ECW around 1993: becomes hardcore legend. Resists lure of major promotions for several years, gets over with genuine heat even from the snarks. Signs for major promotion, becomes franchise and makes millions. Dies in cage match?

4.8.2. On the eve of my suicide party I'm nervous. The expensive and difficult-to-attain 85' Lafite is, according to the latest issue of *Decanter*, prone to corkage. I think of a few 'left a sour taste' jokes but in truth want

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<sup>1</sup> Aborted

<sup>2</sup> Aborted

everything to go smoothly. Friends, beautiful women, commend me on my bravery. Does Jess get blamed? A little, but I say no, don't blame her. Does she try to dissuade me? Yes, let's say yes she does. With a striptease? No, no crying 35 year-olds in school uniforms. I tell friends not to blame her but they do anyway, silently. Who are these friends? Jazz can be there, and his sister with the acne. No need for his little brother. The old detective sheds a tear in the corner. It drips into the whiskey he knows he shouldn't be drinking—when he hears I'm resolute the wagon rolls out of town. Mum's sober in the kitchen, baking. Dad sends his apologies with a bunch of roses. No, dad... kills himself in protest? No, no, dad runs around the house avoiding mum, shouting to me that I'm going to grow up tall and strong. But yes, commended for my bravery. There's talk of true agency: the ability to take your own life. There's talk of the box jellyfish: able to regenerate itself back into a polyp. Where are we in this story? An old bar filled with nostalgia, or maybe the church hall? Or are we at my place? No, too depressing. Think of somewhere to host the suicide party.

But how do I get out of the dying part? Do they all ultimately dissuade me? Does Jazz's sister need my bone marrow? Maybe the latter. Work out the ending.

- 4.8.3. I'm a physicist who creates the Complete Theory, or the unified one or whatever. I prove Einstein either completely wrong or almost right; get to the bottom of black holes. It was god all along, or wasn't. Aliens. I explode the mysteries of a black hole, not with physics but with language: it is language that invented them and language explains them.
- 4.8.4. I'm at the end-point of comedy. Riddled with cancer, I struggle across the old wooden floorboards of the stage. There's a single spotlight, a mic stand, a creak under foot. The audience is in complete darkness. I look out, cough timidly, weakly, then simply smile and shrug my heavy shoulders. The audience laughs, cannot stop, laughing themselves into convulsions, fitting and choking and purpling to death. I lie down, the spotlight narrowing into a halo.
- 4.8.5. Emily walks in wearing her old school uniform. The socks dig a little into the flesh of her calves, making it bulge just slightly over the elastic cuff. Her tie is a faded navy and gold. I'm sitting on a stiff-backed chair with no arm support, my hands loosely tied together with ribbon, resting in

my lap. Emily straddles me, her legs wide apart. Under the pleated skirt I can feel she isn't wearing underwear: the lips of her vagina, the hairs either side, tickle my knuckles. I part my hands, the ribbon falling to the floor. Emily lowers herself a little, her vagina rubbing at the hard bulge underneath my trousers. She unzips me and pulls it out, strokes me with one hand whilst parting her labia with the other, then squats down onto me, taking my entire dick inside her. She lifts herself up so that only the tip stays inside, then drops back down, moaning as she does. She does this again and again, kissing me, too—her tongue in my mouth, sucking on my own tongue, more moaning, the believable sort. Her breasts, I don't care about. Or her breasts are small and soft, I feel them underneath the wash-faded blue blouse. Her pigtails are poorly done. She's lost control of the noises she makes. For some reason, I cannot orgasm. Or I can, I do orgasm, deeply inside her as she strains to say the word "yes".

## Appendix Three

### Interview with Jess Part Two

[When I moved out of the flat I shared with Jess and into this new place I noticed the previous tenant, a retired Eastern European doctor, a drunk with dentures (denture paraphernalia in a clouded relic glass in the bathroom cabinet) who retained a kind of historic impoverishment, had left a potted plant outside the window, secured to the nearby drainpipe with blue twine. The flower in it – I don't know the name – already had the brown tint of death on its petals. Over my first month or two it perished into nothing, disappeared into the tightly packed grey-black soil. I chose this as a metaphor for my marriage to Jess, although when I showed her the pot (she had to lean out of the window – difficult with her pregnant bump – because the knotted twine had hardened in the rain and I didn't have the heart to cut it) I suppose she found it difficult to imagine the flower that once trembled inside. It was Jess who suggested this second discussion, for which I had attempted to cleanse and exercise myself in preparation: three long walks with the dog (even some fetch, which she enjoys immensely and, by transference, I enjoy a little, too); sit-ups; less instant noodles/more vegetables; and ensuring Grace was content downstairs at Jazz's with an eighth and plenty of TV. I hoped Jess would notice a difference but, more, that she'd notice I'd tried. She was wearing tight fitting clothes designed to showcase the protrusion of her belly. She had the glow people speak of, a kind of vibrant healthiness, but her face and calves had widened unattractively. The nape of her neck had always been thin, almost hollowed, which remained the case. The father of the thing in her middle parts – not, apparently, the colleague she'd had an affair with, or with whom – was waiting in his car outside, I was informed.]

J: *I'm here for Emily's letter, nothing else.*

M: I understand. Can we just talk for a moment about how we've each been affected by this?

J: *Why are you talking like you're on the BBC? Is that a tape recorder? Jesus. Look, Emily's death didn't affect you at all. You've convinced yourself it has but you need to stop. You were up on stage taking a shit a week after she died!*

M: I've already explained that's not how it happened!

J: *Whatever—maybe you were snooping into Emily's life at the time but don't you dare frame it as a love story. I don't know what other shit you're trying to work*



*out with this Bill rubbish but having him walk about in some kind of zombie mourning is a sick thing to even think of.*

M: The grief wasn't false! You saw me at Emily's—you can't say I wasn't affected.

J: *You were shocked. Actually, for someone so shocked you did a good job remembering what I was doing, what Emily looked like, the 'line on the spine'. But grief? I don't doubt you can convince yourself that you feel it but just think about your own mind: wishing out loud that you'd been raped as a child? Insisting your mum 'combusted' when you know full well she set herself on fire? Faking love stories about your wife's sister, someone you met once over a decade ago and was, at the absofuckinglute most, the object of your lazy stalking? You're addicted to sadness. The funny thing is you never really get very sad.*

M: I still contend that, if I was rape...

J: *Please fucking god fucking stop.*

M: Jess! Just because you imagine something rather than experience it doesn't mean you don't feel it. But fine, I can see you have many issues with my perception of things. Can we at least talk a little about Bill's story?

J: *You're obsessed. That house you had Bill go back to, with the drinks cabinet and all the old bottles of alcohol? That was your mother's house wasn't it?*

**[Note here how specific her reference is, how it's not particularly in-context with the conversation. I could tell she arrived with it in mind to mention this point, which suggests she left our earlier conversation and read the story again more attentively. This was encouraging, even if I feel she could have chosen a more interesting detail, like the grandfather clock or even the bit where Bill talks into the toothbrush.]**

M: Yes, I had a strong feeling that's where he belonged.

J: *I really do feel sorry for you, and for myself I feel shame that I didn't see how much you needed to speak to a therapist. I know you think this writing exercise was some kind of therapy but it hasn't turned out very well has it? You live in a squat with an immigrant whore and spend your days smoking your brain away and eating fucking instant noodles. You could at least have the decency to think about how this affects me.*

M: You left! How does my life now have any bearing on you?

J: *Because despite my deepest wishes you're part of my life! And if my life is summed up there's a twelve-year period where I was voluntarily your partner. Right now that's embarrassing, and it would be even more so if you ever left the house. What you're doing, this story and, more generally, this [pointing abstractly at everything around her and expressing distaste around mouth and nose area] life you're living, is an assault on my identity. Your existence is my public humiliation.*

M: **[!/?]** Jess, I can see why you're reacting like this but, really, this is a story I have to tell!

J: You have to tell it? Really? *Really?* Emily was an alcoholic and a wreck of a woman but she doesn't deserve to have you as her biographer.

M: I think you're jealous of her, and Grace.

J: **[...]** **[//]** *I think it's about time I took Emily's dog back from you. It's not right to keep her here.*

**[I acknowledge now that my comment above was neither wise nor accurate. I don't think it even made Jess angry: looking back, this seemed to be the sentence she needed to hear, the one that extinguished whatever remained of her interest in me as a fellow human being.]**

M: But we get on! She has a good home here. There were some initial difficulties with what she defined as a toilet and what she understood as being digestible but she's quite content. Even Grace has stopped spitting at her.

J: *I'm taking the dog. I'm Emily's next of kin. I'm taking the dog and I want her letter.*

**[You'll note that there was no mention of Emily's letter during our first conversation. Clearly, Jess had returned to my story and read it more thoroughly. This made me happy and to this day I wonder if that was all I ever wanted.]**

M: You can have her if you come back to me.

J: **[//]**

M: No?

J: **[~]** *I'm leaving. Keep the fucking dog. Keep the fucking letter. Keep everything.*

M: I don't think...

J: [~] *And don't think it's gone unnoticed you've included my actual fucking emails in this thing! That you've portrayed me as to blame for the end of our marriage. Don't think you've managed to depict yourself as somehow noble or self-aware, either. We both know what happened and I'll make sure everyone else does if you try to make yourself the wounded soul of this story.*

M: I...

J: [~] *And you know what you've managed to brilliantly avoid? Why your story opens with 'Bill' standing there looking at Emily's body. You've vomited out every little thought in your head—why not explain how you were the one to discover Emily? It seems to be the most important thing for you, or at least it did for a while until you decided attacking a priest was your thing.*

M: I've tried. Honestly, I have.

J: [~] *All these confessions and yet you can't tell the simple truth.*

M: It's hardly simple.

J: [~] *It's very simple, you just write it down. I'll even give you the order. It goes: betrayal, punishment, invasion, obsession, Emily killing herself. And then if you want to take it all the way up to today you can add self-obsession, idiocy and more idiocy. And the best thing is you've written so much about your insane mother that people will probably excuse you for all of it and diagnose the obvious fucking mental condition you couldn't figure out yourself.*

M: [...]

J: *Oh, and what was the decision, out of morbid interest?*

M: The decision?

J: *You're up on the stage at the end there—I refuse to call you Bill anymore. You're up on the stage and you have three options of what to say. What did you decide?*

M: I just want to say thank you so much for read...

J: *Just fucking tell me!*

M: Okay! I thought it would be either option one or option two but now I think you might be right. I think option three.

J: *Yeah, well good luck with that. I want Emily's letter. You can keep the dog for another few days. I'll pick them both up from you next week. If you try any funny shit I'll call the police.*

## Interview with Father Drummond

[Confession is traditionally held on Saturday mornings, a custom Father Drummond has maintained. Instead of the old fashioned ornate wooden grille, a wire mesh separates priest and confessant. Behind the mesh, Drummond blurred but identifiable: wearing a bright white alb and a green silk stole, in which I'm sure a pattern of gold was threaded, although that might just be a detail from another memory. His hair in its normal quiff. Taped to the front of the prie-dieu is a laminated white sheet with a point-by-point guide to the process. It asks a series of questions for those who may struggle to think of what to confess. The first question is "Has the sanctity of Christ been the most important aspect of your life?" The last is "Do you forgive others of their sins?"]

M: Bless me Father for I have sinned. It's been [...] a long time since my last confession.

FD: *What would you like to confess?*

M: I came at you with a corkscrew.

FD: [...]

M: Father?

FD: *What do you want my child?*

M: I'm three months older than you.

FD: *Sorry?*

M: Bless me Father for I have sinned.

FD: [...] *What would you like to confess?*

M: I have lied, father. I have lied and cheated and stolen.

FD: *Tell me a little about it.*

M: Can we drop the shit?

FD: *Sorry?*

M: You remember me. I know you remember me.

FD: [...] *Yes. It was an unfortunate incident but we need not dwell on it. It's all forgotten.*

M: No, not that. The other thing—you running up to me while my mother burned!  
The smile on your face!

FD: *I'm sorry?*

M: Didn't you even bother reading the manuscript?

FD: *What manuscript?*

**[Full disclosure: I'd forgotten to send him a copy prior to this confession/interview. A little like the moment he stood after Jazz sat him down in the presbytery, I'd once again forgotten to appropriately brief Drummond on his role in this exchange. One of my major faults might be a tendency to neglect the extent to which others might reasonably be expected to anticipate things I haven't explained in detail. More specifically in this case, I was struck by a realisation that Drummond had no conception of his second existence, his second self, split from his adolescent whole one mild winter's day twenty years ago while a broken home burned in the backdrop, an echo that sustained itself somehow, a shadow life that duteously performed each and every role as understudy, usually behind the curtain, occasionally stepping out onto the boards. It failed to occur to me until just then that Drummond couldn't know anything of his life as Bill.]**

M: [...] Forget it. I know you remember what I'm talking about: February 1993.  
Don't you dare make a liar of yourself in this box!

FD: [...] **[This was a considerable pause]** *You sat a lot closer back then.*

M: What?

FD: *In church, when you were a boy. You sat a lot closer to the altar when you were with your mother, third or fourth row I think.*

M: Fourth.

FD: *You may recall I was an altar boy at the time. I remember how loud and high you used to sing the hymns.*

M: In those days I meant every word.

FD: *We used to laugh at you. There was a family who sat in front – a man and a woman with two good looking boys and a girl. They laughed, too.*

M: You think that's original information? Admittedly, it was only years later I realised what they were laughing at but now it makes sense, as does the way mum used to pinch my arm hard when I sang. I suppose people might think I was being obstinate but I was sure at the time she felt my best vocal work was done whilst in pain.

FD: *Your voice used to quiver above the rest of the congregation, strangely tuneless. We ended up having to change the key for a lot of the hymns. Father Gilday had a word with your mother about it.*

M: Don't you fucking dare speak of her!

FD: [...] *I'm sorry.*

M: It's not that easy.

FD: *What? What is it you want from me?*

**[Here we are, my Bill and I together, my Bill asking what it will take, what I need, what release he can offer. After twenty years the ghost is sitting behind a wire mesh offering to vanquish itself, to raze the perpetual doubling, splitting, and imagining that has defined my adulthood. If my aim was ever true, this was where I was always heading.]**

M: Nothing.

FD: [...] *Then why are you here?*

M: I came to ask for forgiveness. I wanted you to forgive me for my decision to never forgive you.

FD: *I was a boy! I understand you must remember it vividly but for me it is a vague memory of being childish and naïve, not intentionally cruel. It was a terrible thing, I know, but it's useless to carry such hostility.*

M: No, there's no hostility. I thought there was but I was wrong. I thought I wanted closure but what I really wanted was to let you know that you'll never be forgiven.

FD: *This is senseless. The sins of a child! Those months ago when you attacked me in my own home, I have forgiven you for that! There was a moment, too: I looked*

*into your eyes and I saw your own acknowledgement of the insanity in what you were doing.*

M: I know what you're referring to—I thought I felt something, too. But I didn't. I convinced myself it was what I wanted. It was a fabricated feeling, a mixture of wild old emotions congealing for a moment in a false way.

FD: *But how can that be if I saw it too?*

M: I have a very powerful imagination.

FD: [...] *Well what now?*

M: You could give me my penance and absolution.

FD: *Is that what you want?*

M: [...] Yes.

FD: *You want me to absolve you of your refusal to absolve me?*

M: Yes.

FD: [...] *Fine. Your penance is one Hail Mary, one Our Father. Deus, Pater misericordiárum, qui per mortem et resurrectionem Filii sui mundum sibi reconciliávit et Spiritum Sanctum effúdit in remissionem peccatórum, per ministérium Ecclesiæ indulgéntiam tibi tribuat et pacem. Et ego te absolvo a peccátis tuis in nómine Patris, et Filii, et Spíritus Sancti. Frustra es homo, in malem crucem! To the Lord we give thanks.*

M: Praise the Lord! We'll never be apart.

**[There must be some sort of trapdoor on the priest's side of the box, as he was gone before I'd finished my response. I sat in a creaking pew outside the confessional and attempted to perform my penance. I stumbled over the words, unable to complete either prayer.**

**I can't say my comments to Drummond about forgiveness weren't influenced by the last question from the confession guide, or even that I meant what I said. Still, as I left the church I could feel it, see it: a shining black 78 record spinning without a single speck of dust in the grooves.]**



## Appendix Four

### THE IGNOMINY AND THE SHAME INSIDE (telling tales: invasions, betrayals; evocations: ruminations, deviations, variations, sedations, and invasive operations)

Any of the following could be considered the beginning of the end:

- a) Naivety: I could go back over a decade to Jess and me taking a pregnancy test a few weeks into our relationship (the latex was ‘forgotten’, ‘lost’, ‘too small’ and an ‘allergen’ in that order), surprising each other with our mutual disappointment at the negative line, softly blurred and pink like a baby. A week later I was introduced to the family at her mother’s funeral and, the following day, after getting whatever response she’d hoped for, she proposed marriage (the common narrative goes: woman traps the man by getting pregnant; I wonder if the opposite was true for each of us).
- b) Rekindling: or to my attraction to live camera online entertainment, which started in the mid-90s (an American college student filming in her bedroom) but had lain dormant throughout all but the last year of my marriage to Jess. For most of this time Jess was happy to be my carer, or at least my benefactor, before her father took priority. And although she had begun her affair prior to my return to the wondrous world of online performance, I wasn’t aware of it until much later. This was – the last year of our marriage – also the brief era in which I was one of a small community of men who existed for no other reason than to make an unpredictable Romanian girl smile.
- c) Culmination: on stage, I stand before all perfectly humiliated. This is the moment I realise if you have to shame yourself make it grand, not minor; make it OBSCENE (Latin ‘ill-omened or abominable’), not merely crude.
- d) Imagination: I forget that nobody sees or understands the exhausting inner life I lead, forget that it looks like indolence on the outside. I forget there’s a divide between the internal and external, forget why the imagined feels so real, forget that nobody else is inclined to imagine the same things, forget that my hour sitting on the toilet making up a career as an undefeated professional boxer with political ambitions, a pro wrestler who dies performing a triple-Moonsault from the top of a cage, doesn’t seem like hard work to wives and lovers. I forget the imagination is some kind of offense.

## I

Choice is an odd thing: I feel AMBIVALENT (this is a perplexing term: apparently a Swiss chap took it from a German word that means ‘equivalence,’ but I don’t really understand that. ‘*Ambi*’ is Latin for ‘both,’ though, while the ‘valent’ bit, you might guess, comes from ‘*valentia*,’ which means ‘strength.’ So I suppose it’s not like I first thought – that I’m unable to make up my mind – but that my mind has decided on more than one thing, which kind of makes me feel differently about everything I’ve ever thought) about how to proceed. But language insists, like history, on one thing after another and not all things at once, so I’ll go with option B.

My early experience with webcams is a discussion for some other time but I can report that for a while in the 90s I was smitten with an innovator of the form, an American college (by which I mean University, of course: Jess used to tease/insult me over how my language regularly slipped into Americanisms, although sometimes, like ‘faucet,’ I was just being accurate) student whose banalities were delivered real-time to my PC monitor in pastel-washed staccato movements every evening for almost two years. Over a decade later I returned to find a different world, more knowing and cynical, everyone operating under the assumption of total anonymity, which it seems people confuse with freedom. It took me a few days to get up to speed.

For the first month I was only a voyeur, unregistered and therefore unable to access audio with all but the most open or least attentive cam girls (the no audio for visitors rule is surprisingly effective at encouraging people to create an account). Much like Bill, I scanned a variety of squared icons: British ‘housewives,’ ‘housewife’ meaning in this context a female over 35 or at least looking over 35, or at least a woman with a not amazing figure; harsh Eastern European beauties who never smiled or did much else, just like in the movies; Asian transsexuals who were always flaccid; ex- or current strippers with their well-practiced and overly sexual unerotic routines; the mishmash of young women working for an agency (you could tell the agency workers after a few days due to the interchanging backgrounds of the themed rooms: dungeon (normally evoked with a bicycle lock and black leather wristbands); office (ring binders that looked to double-up as actual non-prop ring binders off-camera; an adjustable office chair); bedroom (a bed); and what looked to be an eighteenth century explorer’s library (bookshelf-effect wallpaper; globe atlas; occasionally a monocle, pince-nez and maybe a compass), which one can’t help but think of as an apprenticeship for a career in human trafficking; couples, mostly Eastern Bloc (often claiming, for some reason, to be Greek—there *was* a significant increase in Greek solo performers around the time of the second bailout loan, which suggested precarious financial situations for many on an

individual level but still semi-decent internet connections in the main), the men's ability to stay erect in perfect harmony with the stoicism of their expressions; and the straight-up amateurs, many who'd disappear forever after one visit, some who'd stay and forget themselves a little.

Grace qualified for several of these categories. What first attracted me was not her little icon picture – generic, bikini, distantly walking out of a blue sea in the sunshine – but that she was one of the unmuted, the immutable: any non-paying visitor could hear her talk and watch her perform. She would get drunk with the regular visitors who posted her text questions or compliments, which was quite irregular: most women, especially those who worked for an agency were told/trained to keep the tone business-casual, respond to a compliment with 'thank you, tip for more,' a request with 'don't demand without tipping' and a general question with 'I like a man who takes control' (the general question was always the same). Instead, Grace built relationships, learned and remembered details (after I wrote 'remembered details' the more sinister term 'retained information' came to mind, but even now I'm not sure if that's fair) about her 'friends,' laugh with them, share stories, etc. It was a successful strategy, in that it never seemed like a strategy. I only signed up for a free membership one evening when I noticed (I suppose I checked) Romania had elected a new president and nobody had mentioned it all night. She seemed to enjoy it when she got to talk about herself.

So the membership itself is free to anyone with an email address. I set up a new email account – which took longer than I expected and is astonishingly difficult without already having an email account – and signed in to LiveXXXCams to ask Grace what she thought about her president. But a free membership means your name pops up in black when you comment, while all of Grace's 'friends' appeared in emboldened gold, which is what happens when you purchase 'tokens'—monetary gifts you can send to the performers. It quickly became clear Grace didn't talk to the ungolden. The exchange was simple: to receive a response I had to send a token, a bundle of which could be purchased fairly cheaply (1 token = ~7p, depending on the dollar at time of purchase). Since a single token would make her smile her enchanting, gummy smile and say hello, it seemed a harmless and minor transgression (remember I'm still married to, and living with, Jess at this time). It only took a few minutes for my free account to be upgraded to Gold Member. We can call this passage HOW WE BEGAN TO GET TO WHERE WE ENDED UP.

## II

Although it began earlier: as I said, I was a voyeur for a while. The first time I saw Grace she was incoherent, switching (with no distinct segue) between swearing at online requests, complaining about or praising her sister's boyfriend, and inserting a large purple dildo alternately into her anus and vagina then close-up fellating it in a way that suggested she found blowjobs an orgasmic experience (despite the sentence that ends this paragraph, the clitoris-at-the-back-of-the-throat fantasy has never been an interest of mine: shouldn't the real attraction of oral sex be how pleasurable it is for someone to give selfless pleasure?). The empty beer bottles loomed behind her. It happened to be exactly what I didn't know I was looking for.

I'd like to believe she fell for me, which I don't think was entirely naïve. When I became one of her 'Golden Boys,' I worked hard to stand out from her other admirers, mostly through excessive tipping but also by trying to make her laugh. I learned to keep things brief, not to labour the jokes, use a wide variety of emoticons, the newer the better; use cliché—the most banal clichés moved her, and it took me a while to realise I'd initially been pitching my comedic efforts far too high. Puns were a complete waste of time, for example. She enjoyed GIFs of animals falling over, of which there is a plentiful supply online that nobody else utilised. I didn't know it then but this period was the end times of a brief era in which, as I mentioned, a small community of (mostly) men had been enchanted by a Romanian girl who spoke excellent English and was as compelling smoking in her vest and shorts as she was sodomising herself with a wine bottle—whichever she was doing you felt it's what she wanted, that she was there out of choice rather than socio-economic desperation: a community of men with ethical dicks. It felt less sordid than these words make out. At the time it was wholesome, and I was proud of myself that I didn't get bored with her inconsistency, her refusal to take requests like the other cam girls, her tendency to become quite cruel once she knew enough about you to hurt your feelings.

In this section she could be cast as the feisty Eastern European with the heart of gold, a heart dulled but not completely corroded by misogynistic mistreatment, historic political turbulence and illegal abortions in shabby tower blocks (I only managed to sit through one feature length Romanian film); while I'm either the western man who'll help her out of a hole or the guy with a saviour complex who wanted a woman he could control.

(An editorial interlude here: reading over this section on completion, I realised the importance of giving a clear idea of Grace's appearance, which she always carried with

immense confidence. Here's as good a place as any: her legs and arms were lean, long and had a slight hint of muscle, although her calves were large compared to her thighs and bottom. She was pale, hairy, limbs always bruised and scratched. The cacophony of her face was most interesting: big green eyes always accentuated by heavily painted eyelids. Her cheeks were slightly puffy. Her nose was large and her chin very small, the hair that framed all this was always a little greasy yet voluminous and dully ginger. In a frozen moment, a photograph could capture the great variety of her expressions and none would be attractive. But in real time, their combinations and their implausibility were close to irresistible.)

### III

Why did I fall for her? What was I searching for? Who knows about the latter, but the former has a straightforward answer: watching her one night as she got a call to say her grandfather had died. She often spoke to her sister on the phone whilst working the camera, regularly enough for viewers to feel confident typing things like “say hi to Ana” and “fist fuck your sis” when she got a call. But this time it was evidently bad news, the little scrunch of refusal, of impossibility, her face made before broadening into shock and the beginnings of sadness—think of the blankness of a child's face as it begins to realise it has just fallen down or been hit hard by a stray ball in the playground. Obviously it was all in Romanian so I didn't have a clue what was going on, other than it was information she'd never received before, could not quite comprehend. But then the most amazing thing: instead of logging off, rushing to wherever she might be needed, she put the phone down and explained to the camera in English what had just happened, that her grandfather had died in his sleep. The gist I got was that he'd been bedridden for months because, for some reason, Grace had been sleeping in the same bed as her grandmother for a while. Only the previous night she retold the story of her grandmother smiling whilst asleep in bed, softly singing the song she and her husband danced to on their wedding day, demonstrating by humming some hideous Romanian folk melody. And now she was explaining how her grandparents had raised her while her sister was raised by her parents, how they taught her so much about being kind and brave and always aiming high, all the while softly rubbing her clit with her middle finger. I'd never seen such a wonderful thing. I mean, *she* was rubbing her clit, not the grandparents. We all tipped her that night. It amounted to thousands. I myself gave her 1878 tokens to represent the date of Romanian independence. A week later Jess saw the credit card statement. I was aware by then she'd been cheating on me for a few months but I'd unwisely kept secret my knowledge of the affair for too long, accruing

too many sins on my side for it to be used as ammunition. We'd been living exclusively off her salary at that point for several years and I don't really blame her for leaving.

The fallout from the night of excessive generosity on my part was that I became Grace's number one guy. She was offline for a month and when she returned her backdrop had changed, a different coloured wall behind her, a different kind of light (now *these* are telling details). But her fondness for me had remained, even increased. The 1878 tokens moved her – once I'd explained it – and she'd dedicate an hour of private chat at a reduced rate for me every day afterwards. By the time Jess arranged a new flat for me I'd already sent money for Grace's ticket to the UK. I'd also gotten her to defecate on cam for me several times, which she'd never done for anyone else.

This so far is not my ignominy, merely the scaffolding. My ignominy came later.

#### IV

I was never sure if Van was her boyfriend or her pimp. He makes a fleeting appearance in Bill Seven if you're interested. My first acknowledgement of him, or at least the existence of another person in the room, another character in this mini-tragicomedy, was through the text box for communicating with the performers, when I noticed Grace would sometimes type 'thanky thanky' for a token donation whilst her hands were clearly elsewhere. Eventually she dispensed with the keyboard entirely, Van typing exclusively on her behalf. It wasn't a great loss, as her text speak was mostly in acronyms and smiley faces, but Van's mix of stiffly polite thanks and escalating token demands probably played a significant role in the rapid decline of viewers.

There was no agreement regarding how Grace would pay for her stay with me. I'd had to move out of Jess' flat and into one of my own – the dead old doctor's place, from where all these words have been written – comprised of three rooms in an attic that took whatever temperature was outside and exaggerated it to the extreme. I assumed Grace would be disappointed, but when she arrived she was very positive if a little distant—lots of short soliloquies on the things she could do in different areas of the flat ("this is where I can stand, I think so, yeah," "this is where I can work, I think so, yeah"), shaking various fixtures and fittings whilst nodding as if their durability (limited) confirmed something about her life decision. I admit feeling I'd perhaps been rash, partly because it occurred to me I was now indistinguishable from the guys who buy wives from the Eastern Bloc but mostly because I had to get reacquainted with her face: I realised her camera work depicted her in mirror-image, everything the opposite way round. This was particularly disorientating in the case of Grace, whose angles and

gradients were all dramatic (this was done intentionally, Grace mentioned, by Van after she became too distracted by her own unmirrored image staring back from her computer monitor, as if it was another woman). Up until she arrived at my door I'd only ever seen her how she saw herself.

The first week went well. She cooked something for breakfast one afternoon and I ate it without complaining, and, although she cried for a while afterward, I soon got her smiling again. My usual understanding of what might alleviate sadness and stress, what might amuse someone, was completely useless for Grace, so I tried talking about any old thing. I found that she enjoyed mild animal cruelty, men kicking cats especially, so I incorporated that detail into several completely made-up stories of an old man walking to the shop every morning for a carton of milk. Each day he'd wake up and look out of the window at a different weather type, grumble, put on the appropriate clothing and head out to the shop. On the way, a cat would be inappropriately placed – on his doorstep, on top of his bin, peeing on his lawn – and he'd give it a sharp kick in the backside, making it yelp and scamper. Grace drank a lot of milk and my narrative was partly constructed in the hope it might strike her as an idea to replenish it. She never questioned the existence of the man and I'm unsure to this day whether or not we were even close in context. No, she once did ask "who is this man?" which I think was rhetorical. Alas, like everything else one enjoys, the stories needed to get more violent over time to maintain her interest.

Although she never directly referred to bestiality, certain facial expressions she made when the dog entered the room caused me to be, I see now, overly defensive.

## V

She stayed, past a week, into the second and third. We went downstairs to Jazz's a few times and she enjoyed herself immensely. Computer shoot-'em-ups distracted her but Jazz's many gangster movies were of particular interest—she became fond of reciting "say hello to little friend" (omission intentional, I believe) every time I'd walk into a room, which I'd take as an insult if I hadn't also heard her saying it several times when she thought she was alone. One evening she let me watch her give Jazz a blowjob, although as it went on it became less clear what my role in the act was supposed to be, especially with the way he was looking at me (to this day I'm unsure if I dreamed him slipping me a twenty as we left or if it really happened). In my memory of this scene she is kneeling on a prayer mat, although it could've been a normal mat or rug, or perhaps even the spread pages of the free newspaper Jazz often had with him when he returned

home from work. But in my mind it's a prayer mat, which makes me feel bad that I've never really asked Jazz about his faith, although I have actually asked him about it twice: once he started crying; the other he threw a lit joint at me and got angry when I couldn't pass it back before it extinguished. But what I mean is I feel bad that I've never asked him about it in a way that made him happy to talk.

Regardless of her time with Jazz or her cam work, every evening she'd shower and come to me naked. There was no way this was anything other than payment, and my once moral penis was now all too ready to grow and harden with dull inevitability. I suppose it's uncouth to say that her vagina was wide and dry, the latter making up for the former, orgasmically speaking.

This is all really still the scaffolding. Just a few more things...

## VI

Re. Van: it's difficult to know to what extent he was a major player in my ignominy. Grace really did leave him for me, I think. It was just that she travelled less of a distance to leave him than I thought. She'd actually moved to England to live with Van immediately after her grandfather's death, somewhere near Croydon if Van's recent email is to be believed. I assume (despite the many occasions I've pleaded and pleaded with her to tell me the truth she's never once allowed the conversation to happen) this move was already in the works, possibly expedited by the bereavement. This was her lost month, and I can't say it didn't bruise my ego to know she had chosen – and been pimped out by – another man over me.

## VII

Another thing to consider is defecation. (I'd spare you these details if they weren't important to our plot development. Also, I'm the first to acknowledge I got a little carried away during this period.) When I requested Grace do it on camera, even her unflappable façade flapped a bit. I can sort of remember her attempting to subtly negotiate with Van (who must've been standing or sitting behind the camera—this was after her month away, now somewhere in a bedsit in Croydon, my continued reading-up on Romanian current affairs pretty pathetic in hindsight) how to proceed, using little more than the technique of widening the eyes and tensing the mouth into a hostile smile. A scene detail here is Grace standing on black satin bedding, another black sheet



nailed haphazardly to the grey-white wall behind her, sagging at one corner. She agreed, displaying a slight switch in character from enchantress to a kind of low level trader sensing a big break, seeming to nod at something (someone) beyond the camera, slipping into a much more natural business-casual mode than that attempted by so many of her peers.

Obviously the practicalities of this particular niche preclude an on-demand service, so Grace went to eat a sandwich. While she was gone I noticed the slightest shifts of shadow on the sheet in the foreground, black on black. This is the closest I ever got to an intimate relationship with Van. It just occurred to me I must've been paying for that dead air time.

Grace returned in white underwear. I'd like to say seeing her partially naked was more erotic than totally, but no. She turned, squatted, and filled her white knickers, a wry (it really was wry, too, not just attempted-wry) smile as she looked over her shoulder at me on her screen (we're cam-to-cam, so she's seeing a red-faced man with a paunch ejaculating into his left eyeball, as well as a mirror image of her backside, which is noticeably asymmetrical due to a fat white scar on the left buttock from a childhood accident she refused to discuss). 1878 tokens, God bless Romania.

This became a daily thing. Or near-daily—Grace insisted she could only go once every two days, although sometimes she could be persuaded to eat more. As is the way of pornographic experience, much like storytelling, the exciting quickly becomes banal. I'll spare you further detail, but my requests were generally improvised depending on the consistency of her movement. The ultimate high came on the tenth day when she insisted on a dual performance, which took serious coordination. I'm sorry to be crass but it's worth noting that there's a definite increase in orgasmic intensity if coupled with a simultaneous number two (a short note on the erotic here: if I'm reading Freud correctly, sadomasochism is basically summed up as follows: 'I can do whatever I wish because you'll never leave me / you can do anything you wish as long as you never leave.' It's sad that the beauty and purity of this deal has turned into a complete mess of confusion and irresolution. The mutual act was a sort of democratic exhibition, a move from debasement into transaction, and I feel that a lot of what first brought a man to insist a woman might defecate for his pleasure was being dissolved as the first pre-emptive high whistle of wind announced both the end of the master/slave relationship and the arrival of equality. From my anus.). This, inevitably, was the seed of my ignominy.

## VIII

I can't say for sure who possessed the recording of me shitting whilst masturbating. I mean, it was surely Van, although the timing seemed odd in that it became a public document after I had my worst fight with Grace. Somehow, she figured out how to fix the television (she'd later undo whatever she did to make it work), and we made a deal to watch the morning US sitcoms that ran from 7am-9:30am (at my insistence we kept to Romanian hours and woke early as a result, although it also happened that a particularly generous North American (West Coast, the Eastern side are notoriously cheap) audience tended to be online for cam work around those hours, so there was a brief era when the fans of Grace watched her belly dance and flash her anus to the canned laughter of *Frasier*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *King of Queens* and, just once, *Grace Under Fire*. The number of perfectly timed bursts of audience glee corresponding to Grace's positional work would've been high, I'm sure.). I unwisely made a glib remark about one of the comedies – I forget which – and she responded furiously. Actually, my mistake was suggesting that, if not for the artificial laughter, she herself wouldn't be laughing at the particular scene on screen. I guess it was one of too many instances of her emotions being dictated to her. She leapt up and slapped me, swiped from the ironing board the near-completed jigsaw puzzle of a pleasant Venetian canal we'd been doing together, and stormed out. I heard Jazz's door open and close less than a minute later.

I'll say here that I did not take the time to properly consider Grace as an individual.

## IX

The argument was the morning of my ignominy. A little indication of where I stood career-wise at the time: if you're patient you can engineer the situation perfectly to make it seem that you're not a big fish in a little pond. Nobody tends to think of themselves in a little pond, and the ones who jump into a bigger pond, when we're talking stand-ups, are so confused by the change in water (none of us can swim) each pond seems indistinct; each of us seeing ourselves as really being in a kind of inflatable paddling pool. Or what I mean is I gained a minor reputation due to staying in my local scene while others moved on and made names for themselves in London. As far as I'm aware it never occurred to anyone that I might never have had the option to leave. When my scene found acclaim as fertile ground for edgy stand-ups (you only really

need a few successes) I was deemed the godfather of said scene, or at least the one who knew all the club owners.

## X

Art Hussein. If you believed print and TV media at the time you'd think there was nothing in that name, no connotations whatever. Even the right-leaning bloggers avoided discussing it. It was less 'political correctness gone mad (!?)' than, well, I don't know what to call it. Anyway. He was a 'darling of the left,' as they say. And the left is where one fluffed most vigorously if one was to *comedy* successfully (picturing an earnest comic weeping and fellating a line of men in expensive jeans/jacket costumes and well-groomed beards – maybe a beret – might as well be the truth). I admit that, before my ignominy, I was one of those stand-ups who would trawl through three or four newspapers a day, as well as a great deal of internet celebrity gossip. If you're a gigging comic rather than a touring one, some cheap cultural reference is a must, and you just skim over that word 'cultural' without thinking about it too much.

So I knew about Hussein is the point—former Muslim youth activist turned liberal campaigner, then anti-democracy commentator. Strange career shifts, apparently, and the newspapers stroked themselves over him daily. There was a tad more nuance to his point than they credited, mainly that the differences between UK parties were negligible and that our notion of democracy was therefore entirely fallacious. His much-vilified suggestions of revolution were the logical consequence (only fair to point out that he never used the R-word as far as I'm aware, it was the political journalists who translated their inference into his ideology) of his much-ignored comments that democracy could never be changed from the inside. It was a self-affirming loop, the democratic process only providing an artificial choice. Something like that, anyway—I never got fully 'on board' with his ideas as, like most others, a consideration of alternatives tends to make me think we're best leaving well alone.

But obviously he had to be fervently supported by the comics, especially after he was refused the right to speak in a BBC political debate (he wasn't really 'refused:' he made a big show of nominating himself for a spot in a televised debate with the three main party leaders. He had no party, represented himself, and was rejected on that basis. The irony I'm sure not lost on anyone is that his stance – a refusal to partake in the inner-workings of democratic hypocrisy – was the reason he couldn't be involved in the discussion).

Freedom of speech? Roll out the comics. At this stage someone like me is not involved—it's mostly those who are no longer, or never were, stand-ups: Oxbridge Thirds, Footlights Flumps and the like who have an innate ability to read flawlessly from witty auto-prompts. Those people speak first, then a slow trickle of stadium comics who've never been invited to the Royal Variety. Then a week or two before the gig, when your TV hosts and panel-show captains and whatnot are fitting in their Camberley duplexes at the thought of five minutes of overt, irony-free sentiment in front of an actual living audience, the producers send out interns to find a few decent giggers who don't rely entirely on dick jokes, Princess Diana jokes or jokes that might have to be defended by a freedom of speech argument. That's where I came in, initially as a second- or third- or fourth-choice understudy to more established (read: regular panel-show guest) comics, partly because the gig was taking place in my city (Hussein and I were born in the same city, same hospital, a day apart, he wasn't interested to hear in the green room where I was told to sit after my set), the city I've taken great pains not to mention for reasons I now forget. That so many preferred choices ended up dropping out – leaving me a mid-card slot – probably should've been understood as the foreshadowing it turned out to be.

The offer was entirely unexpected and the absolute highlight of my entire life. It was a shame I only had Grace and Jazz to share it with, neither of whom really came round to the idea of somebody telling jokes on a stage. Still, a rare validation. I tried to call Jess but she didn't answer. I thought about visiting Emily. That reminds me there's still a little left to explain regarding Emily, although I think it's best if I leave that to the very end.

(Here's a little earned wisdom before I continue: the big problem with ignominy is that it is not infamy. You can't live down infamy, but at least you can live with it. Ignominy doesn't remove you from the moral framework of judgement. It doesn't allow you to shrug your shoulders at society. It's easier to be a pariah than a fool.)

So the ignominy itself is obviously the shitting on camera thing I mentioned earlier (all these words and I still haven't figured out the knack of building suspense!), although nobody ever actually saw it. All they knew – the audience, the one conservative national rag that ran the story the following day and the other news websites that copied it over the next twenty-four hours – was that a porn site had an eight second clip of me naked, nodding earnestly at the camera and raising a stubby, chubby thumb in solidarity, before turning, bending over, and prising open my cheeks to reveal an impossibly hairy, impossibly purple, swollen gape of black shame orbited by sore pimples. A curious audience member had searched my name on her phone as I walked on stage, and

within a few seconds the entire audience was observing my anus on small screens as I looked out at them on stage talking about an overweight girl with a red liquorice lace hanging from her mouth. Some lifted their phones above their heads and pointed them at me, hollering, whooping, retching, all of which I took for some sort of success until I was ushered offstage by an events coordinator whose earlier reservations (he kept asking me if I was going to be okay before I stepped out) had somehow been confirmed. (It's worth noting that at this moment there was also some laughter, albeit of a reticent sort. If I'm reading Freud correctly that kind of thing happens sometimes.) In the green room backstage I was disappointed to see Hussein himself looking at the clip. I'd expected more.

Over the following days I'd come to appreciate the quality of investigative journalism. Granted, the story only appeared in one rag: a right-wing red top, overjoyed to contextualise the event as some sort of theatre of the depraved (I believe the whole ordeal might have done more harm to Hussein's career than my own). The stealth at which the basic facts of my life had been gathered and condensed into a single brief paragraph was impressive, the only sadness coming at the end when noting that it didn't provide cause of death. And although it would be a miserable obit to some (between the lines: fucked three women; no memorable jokes) there was something encouraging about it, too.

This brings us up to date.

## XI

Writing the above in the past tense has the curious effect of making it seem like my era of Grace is over, something of the past. This is far from accurate and, in fact, every sentence you've read up to now has been written in the Graceless moments of solitude she affords me, shopping for 'souvenirs' (as she insists on calling everything she buys, maintaining a vaguely transient context to our life together), smoking with Jazz and doing her cam work (continuing her job has never been something we've discussed. One morning I woke to find her bent in half in front of the computer and asked no questions—we need the money). It's a different life to the one I shared with Jess, neither better nor worse but certainly not what I pictured for myself.

There was, shortly after Grace arrived, something like a normal existence: the unannounced arrival of a son, a four year-old boy called Florin who rapped his little fist on my door one morning, seeming to have made his way without assistance. On the first day he was explained as Grace's cousin, later that afternoon her little brother, neither of which seem to be entirely accurate. By the end of the week I was a maybe father. I don't

own any toys or games but he seemed to enjoy making up scenarios, wrestling careers, tennis careers, political careers (his Eastern European background brings a wealth of new possibilities to the latter), although I can't say for certain whether he was a cripplingly shy and quiet child or simply couldn't speak English. Obvious complications included: Grace's nudity, whilst not appearing to upset or surprise him; the identity of his father; his inconsistent shitting pattern syncing up with the dog's; Grace presenting him to Jazz and saying "this is him," Jazz nodding slowly; and the faintest touch of cruelty (this was the brief era of the Yelping Dog) that was difficult to punish because of the way he eyeballed you if you raised your voice. Still, he was pleasant company in the main, and sometimes movingly endearing: on only his second day, realising he was cold, he walked over to the old sitting chair where Dr. Munteanu had sat dead for a week before anyone thought to look (what a relief it was to find the place came furnished!), and took from the armrest one of Grace's throws (when she worked for an agency, sharing rooms and sofas with other girls, she got into the habit of bringing a throw or towel with her to cover the communal surfaces of whatever room she'd be in. These things tend to become a part of the process you continue with even after it's necessary) and wrapped himself up in it. It doesn't sound much, I know, but I found it wonderful he was able to recognise the problem and find a solution so quickly. Without the biological complications of family, I foresaw a good future for the two of us. Alas, only a few mornings ago Grace informed me he had "gone to father, to grandmother," with the blunt indifference I've learned not to prod.

## XII

There's a certain type of low level irony Grace doesn't understand, yet I'm unable to stop using. Let me give you an example: I make a self-deprecating comment that isn't meant to be taken seriously and she responds with a perfectly unironic comment, usually a variation on "why would you do that" or "no this is stupid". It can be a nothing thing: I'll give the air of mock resignation and say "I suppose I'll have some of those terrible noodles for supper," to which she'll reply "why you eat every day if terrible? Is stupid," distractedly over her shoulder as she works the cam (I'm in a small way part of her shows these days. A few of her viewers like to ask "how's the fat man?" or "where's the fat man" to which I've heard her respond "the fat man is on sofa" or "the fat man is cooking noodles" or sometimes laugh, or sometimes scream "noodle dick!" to puncture a near-choking fit of amusement). The more I say these things the less she understands me, yet I can't stop wanting to be in some place other than the realm of her

comprehension. (Honestly, I don't think it's a native language thing: the idea of language being more complex than a set of simple signals is not something she accepts: if I ask her what she's thinking about she might respond "what do you mean, 'thinking'?" with a definite scowl. Or sometimes I suspect she just doesn't like me. I have to say, it's a small relief to get this off my chest.)

I'm sure it seems like I'm attempting to make Grace into comedy, to laugh at her expense. Honestly, I'm not that cruel; plus, there's nobody here to laugh *with* me. And without Grace I would never have known Emily.

### STORYTELLING (unlucky for some)

From the outset I was convinced this part of the story needed some kind of framework, a conceit or convention to hold it up, thrust it forward, give it sense. And it's possible that its placement so near the end is down to the difficulty in finding the appropriate supporting device. However, I should stress that it was always my intention to include what follows, even if it might seem like an afterthought or change of heart.

Turning once again to the Checkhardt, my first idea was to portray the story as a FARCE, which appealed due to its described aim being '*to elicit the most visceral mirth: laughter from the belly rather than the brain*'. Sadly, it was quickly clear I couldn't glean much comedy from what follows. Next.

Tucked inside the entry for FARCE was a reference to the ENGLISH MYSTERY CYCLE—since I began this project I had an inkling I was writing a mystery story and, although it turns out to have zilch to do with mystery in the modern sense, the mystery cycle theme felt like a wonderfully fortuitous discovery. For one, its actual definition: '*a cycle of plays depicting the Creation, Fall and Redemption of man*,': Old Testament stuff! Maybe not the *oldest* form of storytelling but early days nonetheless—it felt right to go back to the beginning. The fact it was the re-telling, re-enacting, of even older stories also seemed appropriate. Then there was that triadic progression: creation, fall, redemption. Sounds like legit storytelling to me. But something nagged: at this stage, after the old detective's critical evaluation, Jess's comments, and the old lady with the eggs pretty much telling me to bore off, the only worthwhile function of this entire tale is as a kind of confession, to steer away from storytelling conceits and maybe just deal with facts and honesty. I've held things back in confession before—it brings no solace.

After Jess left me to ruminate on the unexpected angles and shades of life, love and Grace's face, I became interested in how one might go about hacking an email account. Jess's email to be specific, as I was, shall we say, interested in the let's call them developments of her relationship with her colleague aka the cuckolding fuckbone. Probably more interested than I've let on.

As these things tend to go, I had no idea how to do it. The web provided some basic information, the dark web some terrifying offers, but neither really worked out. Considering what I'd used my computer for over the years (not even getting into my ignominy), I didn't want any involvement with people who knew how to do things, while the bright and sterile world of the official web only offered the sort of advice that might've worked to trick an OAP in 1998. I settled for entering her name into search engines, discovering things like the fact she was on an electoral role and that she had a



namesake who made a blog comparing pictures of birds of prey with secret photographs of her middle-aged male neighbour (the latter was quite good fun and probably the most enjoyable afternoon Grace and I have spent together to date). She had no internet presence, which made sense: I think part of the hostility you'll have noticed in her interviews is down to an almost aggressive desire for privacy that had something to do with the minor indiscretions of her family. Emily, however, was a different story. Despite no apparent social media accounts, her name frequently appeared online—she seemed to have an opinion about almost everything written in certain left- and right-wing newspapers: opposition to fracking; anger at victimising the poor (esp. re. NHS use); Catalan independence; animal welfare; veganism and dairy farming; mental health; and a long comment on once seeing the Queen Mother being driven away from a hospital opening in a tinted-windowed Bentley, certain she made eye contact, waving, the QM waving back.

It wasn't exactly what I was looking for but it was something. After I explained it – “investigation stuff, top secret” - Grace enthusiastically went to work: with only Emily's full name, DOB and mother's maiden name she conducted a series of manoeuvres that were immediately confusing and exciting. I can say at one point she went phishing, creating a fake charity website from scratch. She knew the term, but pronounced it more like *pi* (as in the mathematical thing or the food) and *shwing* (as in the sound made famous by the film *Wayne's World*). She also did a lot of “coddling”. This was a period when she said some truly terrible things to the computer screen.

It wasn't the first time I was struck by her talent with languages, even those of the computer realm—strange half-words and commands tucked inside parentheses after parentheses like those little Russian dolls. From nothing she created an off-white webpage with a thin green border. She wasn't happy and made the border thinner then thicker (she said “We must adjust the frontier!” and pumped her fist in the air). Her English was slang-good at times, and apparently she could speak some Spanish and German, too. Yet here she was, instead of anywhere else, living in the one bedroom flat of an overweight failed comedian who had missed his last three meetings with the job centre. It was flattering, although I admit I privately questioned her judgement.

Grace never acknowledged her complete failure at hacking into Emily's email. Rather, she angrily called me a paedophile (this is apropos of nothing: merely an insult she noticed made me BRISTLE ('of a person; often figurative') more than others. There was no indication she considered it any more or less offensive than *small dick*, *limp dick*, *wet spaghetti*, *no cock*, or Romanian sounds like *bou*, *pula* and something that sounded like *neh-no-ro-shit-tue-leh*, although I've slowed it down there) and suggested I start

guessing passwords, which I'd understood to be the very task she was helping me avoid.

Although Grace's contribution came to nothing, it at least spurred me on to try. We'd obtained Emily's email address from an old public forum post commenting on fox hunting (she was anti-, which made Grace shake her head emphatically) and began typing our guesses into the little white password box. Jazz, who, thanks to Grace, now had a copy of my front door key, suggested we use a programme that would automatically type thousands of variations of likely passwords without us having to do it manually. For some reason he was checking my gas meter and writing a number down on his hand as he said it. When I replied that it was a great idea he nodded and left.

Don't let Jess's words fool you—in my own way I loved both sisters, each of whom I was able to better understand by reading their emails, as if unlocking their minds and peeking in whenever I chose. How many attempts at her password would you believe it took me to guess correctly? Fifty? Two hundred? One thousand? One of those figures is true, give or take the number nine.

Emily's inbox was littered with junk mail, much of which was the result of Grace's cybercraft: several requests from her fake animal charity phishing attempt, which turned out to be a heavily bordered single-page website indifferent to the welfare of cats (just a picture of a tabby with an infected eye), and a series of password reset requests from websites of retailers and opinion forums (a naïve hope of mine was that Emily was a member of the *wrestlenow.net* but there was nothing to suggest it true). It was a summation of Grace's efforts.

An inbox of junk and automated emails can be a poignant sight, although not all that much in this case as Grace and I were responsible for almost all of them. But I was able to imagine some other inbox, where the junk was not of my doing, and appreciate the poignancy: an email account devoid of human engagement, all the things one could infer. This led me to the mistake of assuming Emily's email account was a lifeless wasteland, a preserved historical account I could browse at leisure.

While her inbox was something of a mess, the sent items were more TELLING ('adjective: having a striking effect' but also '[no obj.] to have a noticeable, typically harmful, effect on someone: *her words eventually began to **tell on** him*'): a series of emails sent to Jess, an old account she'd left dormant for several years, one of those set up in youth, a name that had to be abandoned upon entering the world of job applications. For some reason none of Emily's messages had bounced back: it would be

fair to assume she thought Jess had read them. The dog hadn't quite caught the car but the cat saw the cream, if you get me.

The first email to Jess I opened (not the first she sent—the fourth, in fact, of perhaps twenty-five over a period of just under two years) was a long message (they were all long) about a train trip north from Preston to Scotland, in which Emily was retracing the journey she took as a child with Jess and her parents (you read about it in a different form in chapter six, CANALS (a connection between rivers, a ghost in the details)). There was apparently some Scottish residue in the father's blood, the trip itself one of several that seemed to be forced around this period: bored teenage girls and middle-aged parents struggling with the burgeoning tedium and irritation each evoked in the other, a new possession nobody knew how to manage, like a wart that could just about be concealed (*"Remember dad insisted on that long walk up the mountain and mum was almost happy when we got lost? Do you think she really twisted her ankle? I know dad didn't."*) (There was an older brother who'd already fled; a younger brother – that turned out to be a half-brother – on the way). But the memory was important enough for Emily to re-enact: she went back to see Glasgow, the museum, walked part of the Forth and Clyde Canal—inspecting the ghosts one can't help but leave behind, the memories that a place holds for you—much like the lip of the cul-de-sac where Drummond's voice still echoes from the brick garden walls and uneven pavement, over the ancient sloping sandstone on which it was built. The immediate affinity I felt for Emily was unlike anything I'd ever known, or at least could remember.

Or was it only later those feelings came to me, after her death? I have no access to what I thought back then, no locations to revisit. Do you ever think of your past without being able to fathom what you were thinking? Isn't it curious one can never be again a former self (*Blessed be with you!*)? Are her words more resonant now I can only ever know her as a 33 year-old suicide? This is a question I still think about a lot, and you can see some of my working out in Outtakes 3.2. I think the problem is that, while language is the evocation, it can never quite be the solution: I reach for the same words, search for and stretch out their meanings, but they only ever express something in terms of something else.

There were plenty of other stories: how she got her dog from the rescue home and cried about what a nervous wreck it remained even though she cared for it so lovingly (an experience I, too, have had); the story about how she was sexually assaulted by her boss at the cinema (ON EMILY (work experience, a biographical story, how elucidation insists on a more formal tone)), although she seemed very careful to avoid using the words assault or rape); the game she played with Jess, one describing a

person the other couldn't see ("You'd hit my knee if I used a cliché!") that I stole and butchered in chapter eight of part one.

I think of it like this: there's ECHO (a reflection of sound waves from one blah blah) and also ECHO: *a nymph deprived of speech, only able to repeat the voices of others*. I mean, try not to think of me as a nymph. But to leave Emily's memories, the echoes of her experience, to PETER ('another term for echo' (!) but only in sense 4, which is in reference to the card game Bridge) out, to die with her, seemed both an insult and an assault. So I took the train North and sat for a while in the crappy transport museum canteen where she remembered her father had stocked up on water and Lucozade, before driving to the Trossachs where, getting lost, mummy and daddy had one of those fights played out in silence (Jess and I recreated these quite accurately, I think, even though I didn't have access to the source material at the time); I visited the cinema – now abandoned – where she worked and experienced something that seemed neither quite sex nor rape; I cried for a while at rows of caged, lonely dogs. Sometimes I sent Bill—to sit in the corner of a room where a party took place, watching Emily watch everyone else, like how she wrote it to Jess, struggling through a conversation about Kieslowski with a guy who was only interested in sleeping with her (how I wished Bill was more Alpha!): *"When I asked him which film he liked best he just laughed. I asked again and he walked away"*; or to follow her on a trip to Africa, standing in the rain and gazing:

*"In the Swahili phrasebook "rain" is mvua, "love," penda, and "I love," nakupenda. But I wasn't allowed to say it: during a rainstorm in Kenya, one day, inside a pub for shelter, these guys were looking at me for so long I had to say something. They'd been huddled outside around a TV playing some melodramatic soap opera before it started to pour and the power cut. I guess I'd been sat at the window smiling, and when I realised they were laughing at me I could feel my face burning up. There was nowhere to hide so I tried to tell them that I loved the rain. They got what I was saying, but nakupenda means "I love" in a romantic way, apparently, which made sense considering it shared a page with 'do you have a condom?' and 'easy tiger!' in the book. This was a no-go. In Swahili you have different kinds of love, which the literature didn't mention. I tried to explain that the word can mean all sorts of things in English but I got lost somewhere; their way seemed to make more sense. I argued anyway, knowing it felt wrong. They let me have it in the end, said 'okay girl, okay,' but really they were just laughing at the silly girl who thought she could love the rain."*

Or Bill in another corner, for he is a man of corners, in a kind of studio, watching Emily stretching a canvass, smelling the rabbit skin glue and thinking it was exactly the same smell that entered Titian's nostrils 500 years earlier.

Strange, finally displaying Emily's words brings about the exact same feeling I had when first showing Grace my penis online, part-liberation, not too dissimilar to the clean-record sensation of post-confessional, even if sins dissipate into nothing while my penis only diminished. These were the sorts of ruminations, anyway – how to say you love something, how to be outside of everything – that kept me rapt and, later, after her death, made me think of Emily as something that I couldn't let slip away forever. To become an Echo is an obligation, the truest kind of love story, although one which, I admit, I've struggled to tell—contaminated it with my own dirty prints. Spare a thought for the poor bastards who feel every fibre of life but have no talent for storytelling.

I'm not certain, but I get the feeling one can sense an end is nearing when the writer begins to work chronologically. I know it's been an imperfect journey to this point, the rancid anti-conclusion you've already guessed, where I tell you how I idly scanned through Emily's email and found, written earlier that week, a draft of a suicide note to Jess. How I rushed to Emily's flat, called her number (I'd been hanging up on her for a month but she'd always picked up until then), waited in the chilly morning rain until a neighbour opened the communal door, crept inside, edged open Emily's unlocked door, and saw her hanging in the living room. And how, after calling Jess, calling the police, I pocketed the printed note she'd left on her desk, weighted down by a book of collected poems, the spine cracked and worn.

And you can guess the creepy gradations I suppose? My increasingly morbid interest, the re-reading of every word she wrote, my calling and hanging up (that lilting 'hello' I knew so well!)? I swear it's not so sinister on the inside. If you read all this in Woody Allen's voice it becomes more palatable. Actually, maybe read it in Blessed's.

Does this work as the closing of a mystery story? I think maybe not but it's all the clay I have.

FUNNY STORY (happy endings, lingering death, optimism)

Funny, the second I stop looking for a good metaphor, one seems to fit perfectly. I've never quite been able to get away from the fact every word is made up from some other, that once you start looking for metaphors *everything* becomes one, which can be a little tiring. Yet here I am, prone, nose to the floorboards, thinking maybe this is it.

Since my ignominy (partly due to Grace's suggestions, Jess's accusations) and the Drummond affair, I've been working on getting outdoors. I've taken to the late-morning, which means I avoid a group of online Americans who like to see Grace mock and ridicule me (in short: army sergeant, bumbling private, belly squeezing and a penis lock) but are stubbornly frugal with their tokens. For a while it was everything I had just to get to the nearest public building: a satellite of the local hospital, the antenatal clinic. The waiting room was pleasantly quiet, the soft light complementing the features of the infrequent smiling nurse, glowing woman, and the odd blank schoolgirl. There was a coffee machine that had a fault I learned to take advantage of: if I chose the 'Rich Blend' option it would dispense *two* pouches of granulated coffee instead of one, the upshot being double-strength coffee. It tasted terrible and gave me mild stomach pains, but also suggested things might be looking up.

But after a few weeks the waiting room had become much busier, suggesting a glut of summer holiday sex the previous year: most women were at least as heavily pregnant as Jess last time she came over. Even early in the morning it was unusual to find a free chair that had empty ones either side of it, which is my preference. I began to receive some looks I didn't appreciate and decided not to return.

Luckily, it was the beginning of Spring and the air was becoming milder. Each morning, up until yesterday, I'd walk past the antenatal clinic to the park, an additional five minutes inside Freud's metaphor of limitlessness, if I've read him correctly. This has been a good period: I feel like I've harnessed the metaphor somewhat, used the limitlessness productively by writing new material, a new set. Healthier stuff, too, fictional narratives rather than using true stories, which are much less likely to leave me in a funk.

As I said, up until yesterday, the day of my surgery. There's a lake in the park, wide and shallow and green-brown, that children can paddle in of a summer. I have some recollection of doing so myself many years ago. But if I walked around the lake I could get to a quieter section, with large evergreen trees, a row of raspberry coloured hollyhocks and a path that was rarely used. Thankfully, it was also a good distance from the children's play area.

I'd write shorthand lists for a set, normally just a topic heading and then a word or two underneath. The fresh air and the quietness turned out to be even better than the antenatal waiting room at helping me concentrate. It would only take ten or so minutes before I was focussed and no longer in need of coffee, something I realised actually hindered my concentration. People with dogs would occasionally walk by in the distance, with plastic bags inverted over their hands. Since Jess's threats I'd stopped taking the dog out in case she was waiting to nab her, opting instead for a litter tray in the kitchenette. Mothers in the park never had plastic bags, even though the children were kept on similar leads and also, I'm certain, shat on the grass.

The day before yesterday I was sitting on my usual bench working when I was distracted by a dead pigeon in the grass. I had seen dead pigeons before, but only in the gutters of roads. This one seemed to have fallen from the air mid-flight. It was the warmest day of the year so far and there were many more children than normal, meaning a school holiday or maybe a weekend. Their play-noises caused starlings to unspool in groups from their trees and pattern in flight to other trees. Every now and then one would be charmed from its perch by breadcrumbs or litter they mistook for food, which seemed an exhausting endeavour.

One small girl came very close to the pigeon and stopped. She looked up at me and I immediately wanted to assure her that I hadn't murdered the thing. Her face was perfectly round and honest, and she had yet to develop any features that could make her distinguishable from any other child, including Florin, who, despite being darker, had the same doughy nose and lips. I worried she wouldn't believe that I was innocent. She looked for a long time at where I held a pencil and the envelope on which I was writing. For a moment we were both still, until she picked up the bird very elegantly and held it under her chin. The wings drooped, covering her hands, and she held her position carefully. I realised she thought I was drawing, and that she wanted me to draw something for her. I had never drawn a person before, but I obliged. I started with her shoulders, and worked the pencil inwards and upwards into her neck. I chose to draw the pigeon last, as all of the other details were more familiar to my eye. Her face came out surprisingly well, although the lines of her cheeks were a little narrower than in reality.

What I began to notice was how obedient the little girl was, how intently willing she looked. I raised my drawing hand and indicated for her to move a little to her left. It worked! She stepped very slowly, keeping eye contact for the moment when I told her to stop. As I continued I became braver, spiralling my index finger to get her to turn to one side and then the other, then making her giggle as I rotated my finger very quickly to make her spin on the spot, still holding the pigeon carefully under her chin.

When the girl's mother arrived I was naturally a little concerned with how she would perceive the scene. But she was neither angry nor concerned, and seemed to have the same curiosity as her daughter. She didn't say anything, which I appreciated, and instead gently took the pigeon from her daughter. It was clear now I was wrong to think the little girl had no features. She had her mother's pretty mouth and large green eyes, although not yet the busy red flush to the cheeks every mother has. Very attractive, although no sexual thoughts came to mind: it was just nice to experience someone thinking about me in a positive way.

The girl gave up the pigeon without protest. Her mother inspected it, holding it up by its feet. She held it close to her face and gently stroked her index and middle fingers down its breast. Buoyed by the reaction, I slowly raised my hand to get her attention. She looked over at me and immediately moved her chin upwards and to the left at my signal, looking to the heavens. With another signal I ushered the little girl to stand closer to her kneeling mother. The bird's wings had again drooped in an arc, and the girl took one in each hand and pressed them back against its body. It was as if a simple flick of my wrist could make them do anything. I turned over the envelope and began drawing the mother.

When I'd finished, I smiled and nodded to the mother. She smiled in return and approached the bench, the little girl very carefully putting the pigeon under her arm before catching up. Closer, it seemed to be a soft toy.

I handed the mother the envelope and she smiled kindly with her mouth closed. We were all smiling differently, I think. When she looked first at the drawing, of her daughter, her eyebrows raised a little and her mouth seemed to shrink. It occurred to me, just as she turned over the envelope to look at the second drawing, she expected to see herself *with* her daughter, not separated eternally on opposite sides. She had also assumed I was talented, which I thought unfair. She dropped the envelope in my lap before the child saw it, took her by the elbow and left. I possibly should have annotated the piece. As they walked away, an orange butterfly flickered over my hands and rested on my thigh. Then it left, too.

The day after, yesterday, I had my surgery. In some ways they'd revamped the hospital since I was last there, visiting dad; in other ways not so much: still vaguely aqueous. After some screaming and crying (from both of us) Grace agreed to come with me, which meant I'd be allowed to leave the same day—the thought of sleeping anywhere other than in my own bed, or the sofa since Grace arrived, not something I was ready to contemplate. It turns out she does *not* have a high opinion of doctors. I know what



you're thinking: a childhood Romanian backstreet abortion gone wrong. I have the same thoughts, although I'm unsure of the method or value of bringing up such a topic.

I was distraught to learn I'd be awake for the operation, and the whole thing ended up being delayed by three hours due to my one-man fainting show. I started to cry, not because I was afraid but because I couldn't stay conscious, but Grace calmed me, held my hand in both of hers and said "if your eye will fall out how will you see me?" Once again I was a man in love.

The procedure itself took just over an hour and was uncomfortable but painless. First, a long needle below my eyebrow anaesthetised the area (Grace asked "Is Botox?" and laughed like a soap opera villain, then "No, serious?"—I'd insisted she had to stay in the room, she eventually relented to wearing a surgical mask and standing in the corner, facing the wall, turning around every so often to look and scream), before a few little cuts were made into my eyeball, something was peeled off, and a bubble of gas was pumped in. All I can see out of it is the milky grey blur (strange how many things seem milky to me these days) of an overcast sky. My eyepatch is white.

The post-surgery position necessary to give the little gas bubble the chance to do whatever it's supposed to (I fainted each time it was explained) is called 'posturing'—lying prone, the tip of the nose squashed to the floor. As I said, after I'd given up on finding an accurate metaphor, one has presented itself.

When I started writing this thing I thought it would end something like *Don Quixote* (which, yes, I actually finished—Grace time has wavered recently): old and lonely, ready to die. Perhaps Jazz would make his way upstairs and wipe my brow, tell me not to go so soon, that we could take a trip, somewhere nice and quiet where I could stop my imagination getting the better of me. But it turns out not: my end is much more like one of those Raymond Carver stories I could never really relate to, where a man lies face down on his living room floor and thinks, through the gaps in the floorboards, he can almost see Jazz and Grace laughing below, while an ex-wife somewhere is trying to forget him: an ending that sounds like a metaphor for something or other if you're that way inclined.

Of course, that's not quite the end. As I said, it's Emily who finishes. At the very least I owe her that. As for me—you know what I think of endings and resurrections. I'm tired, lying here, and finding it difficult to remember the last station of the cross.

## Appendix Five

**[Emily's note was left on a mango writing desk in her living room, weighted down with a book of collected poems, author unknown, below a window that looks out onto the street. It was inside an unsealed envelope, addressed to nobody. It was typed and printed.]**

You taught me the difference between moths and butterflies, remember? Nothing to do with colour—it's that, at rest, moth wings are flat, while a butterfly will close them together like in prayer because their undersides are camouflaged—praying to stay hidden.

*One beat—two beats—newspaper crease:* "Just looking for food and a fuck." Remember dad in the garden in Durban, after mum saw a painted lady struggling against the breeze? She called it a 'losthappy flutter' and he timed that response. Did you know she got that phrase from Joyce? She said it more than once. Why didn't he ever have time for the things she said?

It was different after they sent you back to England—with just three of us everything ended up unfair. Two used to gang up on one. I remember relishing it at first—being in collusion with someone else has always made me feel safe, like when we'd play outside in the summer, running around those tall tufts of burnt yellow thatching grass (remember we would never be princesses or queens, never a cowboys or Indians, always servants or horse trainers, or even mum and dad? And when mum called from the porch, using her hand as a visor against the low sun, you'd fall out of character so quickly while I never could?).

With Dad there was rugby. He took me to see the Natal Sharks a lot when you left. I was his last chance after you. I remember him saying out of nowhere once, sitting in Kings Park stadium, as I was gnawing on a sosatie skewer, that he knew even when you were very little you would never be the type of girl to do something you didn't want. He knew I was.

We went to see the Sharks every home game one year, and we both knew Mum hated us talking about it in the house. I think, then, her getting angry and storming off used to fascinate me—I never understood why. During some 2am screaming session years later she told me she always knew what was happening.

With Mum it was different. Dad never really had any interest in art. This was when Mum was still at Durban-Westville, I guess probably the height of her academic career. He was already quite sensitive about her trips, her suitors, etc., plus the fact she

was earning about half as much as she could anywhere else. When Mum and I used to talk about painting he'd just rustle his paper and cough loudly. When I was too young to know, it used to be funny to me and I'd always instigate it. Mum would usually rein me in. But when I was a few years older and she used to bring up an artist, or do this thing where she'd say, oh my, the sky's like a Turner! which Turner is the sky like, Emily? I'd be right in the middle of it. Dad was so tense the air thickened, and if I didn't respond to Mum she'd consider it a betrayal.

Do you have secret stories like mine?

Before you got to the hospital the nurses told me I should talk to mum, said she could hear everything. I never did, did you?

Remember when she passed you said that her mouth seemed bigger? I waited around until the specialist came back and asked, asked why it was creeping down her cheeks like that. He just told me not to worry! I made a point to ask the coroner, who said that when she died her muscles stopped working, stopped resisting gravity. Like that's all she ever did.

I'm sorry I didn't help you with dad. It wasn't that I didn't want to. As soon as I could put up a fight he lost interest, and I don't think he wanted me to see him as a weak man. Remember at the wake, when you brought that guy along (I think he lives close to me. I've seen him once or twice, rubbing at his eye)? Dad was so angry that I knew I had to leave. I always thought you knew exactly what you were doing then.

Tell little Luke I love him. Tell big bro thanks for paying for the funerals—he can pay for mine, too. I love you too, sis.

There's no need for a why. Remember what mum said about Zeno—I go of my own accord and you should be happy for me. Be happy.

Emily

END



## *Critical Mass*

## Introduction: *points of view*

In 2007, Jonathan Lethem published a long essay in *Harper's* magazine titled "The Ecstasy of Influence," later hard-backed by Vintage in a collection under the same title. The riff on Bloom's phrase is apt: the collected essays spend an equal amount of time exalting Lethem's traditionally unliterary influences (comic books; pop music: etc.) as his literary ones (Calvino; Ballard), as well as undermining certain well-established writers and critics (John Updike; Saul Bellow).

As one infers from Lethem's title, his essay proposes a kind of corrective to Bloom's anxiety: a celebration of the myriad influences a contemporary writer brings to her or his fiction. It is not, however, that Lethem wishes to revel in the very thing Bloom identifies as problematic.<sup>1</sup> Rather, Lethem detects a common problem for a contemporary artist as being engaged in a process of both commodification and gift-giving, of being in both the marketplace and the cultureplace. His argument is a critique of copyright laws and intellectual property, an acknowledgement of what he perceives as a "vast gray area" in which an artist should be able to operate. The originality of the essay emerges in its final quarter, where Lethem provides a key to show how almost every sentence has been taken – at least in part – from an admixture of publically available works of art – some under copyright, some not – speeches, dust jacket copy, interviews and anecdotes, occasionally verbatim, other times so significantly changed as to make any citation redundant (which, of course, buttresses Lethem's point: influence is ubiquitous).

Lethem's essay is not an explicit corrective of Bloom's *anxiety*, but rather a commentary on the superfluity of legislative regulation in the age of cross-pollinated inter- and extra-literary influence. In this manner, it stands alongside David Shields' *Reality Hunger* in its wish to celebrate the myriad influences that make up a creative contemporary work. The problem with the essay is not that it isn't good or clever—it is both. The problem is that it wasn't what I wanted it to be.

One thing that will certainly happen when you are found out as a fraud is that social situations will become a little more awkward. An example might go like this: you're at a party populated by guests you don't know. The kind host, your friend, thinks she is doing you a favour when she introduces you to two English Lit PhD candidates standing in the corner. And, because she has other duties that evening and is a little rushed, flushed from a large glass of wine, distracted, she might introduce you by saying something like "Paul's

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<sup>1</sup> Although Lethem calls his title a "rebuking play" on Bloom's, it very rarely – if at all – becomes ecstatic. Rather, it is a reconfiguration of the felt anxiety an artist has to her or his influences at a time when the exchange of information is so prevalent one might not ever be entirely aware of how or when they are being influenced.

doing a PhD in English, too.” At which point you might hope your smiling ‘hello’ contains enough obvious discomfort and terror as to not encourage questions. But one might come, a simple question: what’s your thesis on? If this happens, you might have to hold up your hands, tilt your head a little, and admit your PhD is actually in creative writing. You’ll probably emphasise those last two words with a tone of deference, hunch up your shoulders and try to look even more bemused than your interlocutors that such a thing exists in academia. You’ll later realise, from their awkward and polite responses, that you played it wrong: you should have shown more confidence in your doctorate, spoken about how a big part of completing it is *figuring out* what a creative writing PhD actually is. At this point it’s too late. You haven’t made new friends. This is the best case scenario.

Another hypothetical might go something like this: you’re introduced as a PhD candidate in English Literature. You’re asked “what’s your thesis on?” You mumble something about David Foster Wallace and James Wood before quickly returning the question, allowing no space for them to ask you to elaborate. As they explain to you what they mean by ‘Fludernikian Normalisation in Kafka’s Blue Octavo Notebooks,’ your host will return to your corner and correct herself: “Silly me! Paul’s actually doing a PhD in creative writing! Isn’t that *interesting*?”

It doesn’t matter if either of these hypotheticals is actually hypothetical. The moral is, if you’re completing a PhD in creative writing, you should come up with a good sentence to describe it. Here’s mine: A thorough interrogation of the creative impulse and the influences that shape a creative work. A critical mass, if you will.

My problem with Lethem’s essay: while it identified the appropriation of the words and ideas of others, it did so knowingly, with planned-out intent. There is very little ecstasy in such a well-structured conceit, although “The Lucid Acknowledgement of Influence, References Included” admittedly doesn’t have the same ring to it. The conceit is interesting but, I feel, unsatisfying despite its cleverness. The difference between his approach and mine is one of plotting: whilst Lethem carefully constructs his essay in a manner that exalts the construction itself as the point of the work, the aim of this piece is to take the scalpel to oneself, as it were, to determine how and where influence is most compelling.

Once you have decided that the above is your thesis, you will realise it is impossible to complete. The vast and varied literary and extra-literary influences you can identify on every page of your fiction are too numerous. Your only way to categorise them would be in a similar listed breakdown a la Lethem, which, as you’ve just decided, isn’t what you want. So you narrow your thesis. Or you *should*, but don’t, because, as you’ve already determined, it sounds good.

So you’re stuck. Then you read the following comment from James Wood, in a list of tributes to David Foster Wallace, compiled shortly after his death (from Edward Champion’s blog *Reluctant Habits*):



I was terribly saddened to hear this news. Whatever one felt about his work, it was hard to imagine any serious reader of fiction not being intensely interested in what he was going to do next. I had been looking forward to witnessing his literary journey, and to adjusting my own opinions and prejudices — or rather, being forced by the quality of the work to do so. Of great interest to me was his own ambivalent relation with some elements of postmodernism (irony, too-easy [s]elf-consciousness<sup>1</sup>, and so on), and the burgeoning presence of moral critique in his work. One had the feeling that his new work was being written under considerable pressure — and I don't just mean psychological pressure, but the pressure of staying loyal to his fractured, non-linear epistemology while at the same time incorporating some of that admiration he had for the concerns of the nineteenth-century novel. To put it flippantly, he was aesthetically radical and metaphysically conservative, and the negotiation of that asymmetry would have been a marvelous thing to follow, as a reader.

An untruthful reviewer of my book, *How Fiction Works*, claimed that David Foster Wallace was its “aesthetic villain.” That is not true. I discussed him as an extreme example of a tension I think is endemic to post-Flaubertian fiction, which is the question, as Martin Amis once put it, of “who’s in charge”: is it the stylish author, who sees the world in his fabulous language, or his probably less stylish characters, who are borrowing the author’s words? Wallace’s fiction, I wrote, “prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America, and he is not afraid to decompose — and discompose — his own style in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him.” One of the most impressive aspects of Wallace was that stylistic fearlessness.

On Friday, I was pondering writing a note to Wallace to say as much (and to correct the impression he might have got from that review), and then on Saturday came the terrible news — “like a man slapped.”

You think a lot about this tribute. These are two writers that mean a lot to you, and who, superficially at least, seem to stand for different things: the post-modernist who was also a classical moralist (or “aesthetically radical and metaphysically conservative”) and the traditional literary critic who was also more open to obscure and challenging fiction than his own critics liked to admit. You have some reasonable thoughts, like whether it is appropriate that Wood uses the occasion to clarify his stance on Wallace’s work. You also wonder, unreasonably, other things, such as whether, if Wood had pondered a little less, a well-timed note might have changed anything.

You read Berryman’s Dream Song #153...

We suffer on, a day, a day, a day.  
And never again can come, *like a man slapped*,  
news like this. (172)

...and find it a little odd that Wood would choose to quote Berryman’s lament for his close friend, Delmore Schwartz: Wood never met Wallace, and the emotion of his final sentence

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately written in the original text as “elf-consciousness”

seems artificial, the parenthetical aside unable, unwilling even, to shake off the sentiment of correction in the previous paragraph.

Lewis Hyde, whose book *The Gift* is plagiarised (then referenced) at some length in Lethem's *Ecstasy of Influence* and also "meant a lot to Wallace," (Smith, 292) wrote, on Berryman's *Dream Songs*, that "both Berryman and his critics have seen the mood here as grief or suffering. But both of these differ from anxiety in that they are active and directed toward an end. The grief we feel when someone dies moves toward its own boundary [...] Grief that lasts much longer than a year does so because it has been blocked in some way. It is then pathologic, just as a blockage in the blood system is pathologic. In fairy tales the person who weeps and cannot stop finally turns into a snake, for unabated grief is not human." (12)

The first half of this quotation is relevant, you think, to Wood's use of the Berryman line. Hyde's assertion, that Berryman's ostensible grief was actually a kind of performance driven by (alcoholic) anxiety, could be applied in a slightly different context to Wood, who's stated sadness is betrayed somewhat by his anxious desire to set the record straight.

The second half of the Hyde quotation puts you in mind of your own work, in which the narrator asserts his grief over the death of Emily. Similarly to Hyde's reading of Berryman, the narrator's performative grief is pathological. When Hyde writes of *Dream Songs* that "The core mood of the poems is anxiety and dread, and when they leave that they do not rise out of it but slide sideways into intellectualising, pride, boredom, talk, obfuscation, self-pity and resentment," (13) it occurs that, while Berryman's grief may be more sincere, the very same admixture could be applied to your own narrator.

Despite the burgeoning suspicion that Wood's use of Berryman's line, and the tribute as a whole, is deeply problematic, you can still appreciate his desire to correct the "untruthful reviewer": the review he references, by Walter Kirn in the *New York Times*, was written only a month earlier and, although actually referring to Wallace as "**one** of [Wood's] book's **few** aesthetic villains," might give the impression Wood did not regard Wallace as a talented writer.

In *How Fiction Works*, Wood actually identifies Wallace and John Updike as polarities, in a kind of dichotomy of style: in Updike, "the author gets in the way," and, in Wallace, "the character is all." (28) What he means by this distinction is that the narratives of Updike, at worst, suffer from authorial intrusions that undermine a sense of realism, while Wallace's prose comes from "within his characters' voices," (27) with such fidelity to the cadences and lexicons of his subjects that, at its most extreme, the writing can be "hideously ugly, and painful for more than a page or two." (27)

Kirn's quotation of Wood's "hideously ugly," out-of-context, suggests Wood is being more damning of Wallace than is the case in *How Fiction Works*, where he couches his

criticism with the acknowledgement that Wallace “pushes to parodic extremes his full-immersion method,” and that, as he repeats in the tribute, “[h]is fiction prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America, and he is not afraid to decompose – and discompose – his own style in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him.”

You always thought this was good criticism, praising a writer’s aesthetic convictions even when their style is not to one’s taste. Then you are reminded of where the majority of Wood’s comments on Wallace were originally published, in a review of a short story collection, in which he called one story “a piece of shit” (twice).

“On Friday, I was pondering”. Just before the weekend began, after reading Kirn’s review of his latest book, Wood was pondering contacting Wallace to clarify his opinion. Did the pondering start and end on the Friday? Did he conclude that no, he would not send the note? Did he decide that, since his book and the review were in the public domain, it would be more appropriate to refine his position on Wallace’s work publically, too? In *How Fiction Works*, Wood recycled the majority of his comments on Wallace from a 2004 review of *Oblivion*, Wallace’s final collection of stories, published in *The New Republic*. This suggests they were convictions he stood by. How might he have gone about “correct[ing] the impression” Wallace may or may not have had?

You return to Wood’s original review of *Oblivion*, a piece that has been noticeably omitted from his collected books of criticism, perhaps because Wyatt Mason, in his own review of the collection in the *LRB*, had called him out for misreading the title story.<sup>1</sup>

Wood’s complaint of the story “Oblivion” is a moral one. He complains that Wallace creates a narrator to sneer at, to mock instead of understand:

Not content with making the narrator facetiously unreliable, he makes him repellently fussy and preening. He gives him a style that resembles a bad parody of late Henry James. Thus the husband has a tic of putting many of his words in quotation marks, and of redundantly repeating certain words: “my wife’s original or ‘maiden’ name.... I gripped the small table’s ‘burled’ or beveled sides in a show of distress....”

The pomposity of this narrator has disastrous results for the story. What might have been an affecting and genuinely ironic domestic tale, about a man’s comic-pathetic inability to read correctly the warning signs in his marriage, becomes instead a fantastic and repellent exercise through which the reader can barely drag himself. Moreover, the hideousness of the husband’s voice stacks the cards against him, precluding any possibility of sympathetic identification. “Look at this pedantic little idiot,” Wallace seems to be saying, “which we can tell by looking at his absurd

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<sup>1</sup> In his opening remarks to a discussion of Wallace with DT Max at the Mahindra Humanities Center, Harvard University in 2012, he credits Mason, along with Sven Birkerts, for “educating [his] blindness” regarding Wallace’s work. This, along with a careful and positive reading and public discussion of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* at the 92Y, also in 2012, indicates Wood remains keen to continue his thinking on Wallace.

manner of speaking." So irony is starved to sarcasm, and sympathy to voyeurism. It is literally impossible for the reader to enter the story; Wallace has sealed all the gates.

Here is where you decide to change pronouns, as the formal distance of 'you,' chosen in an attempt to disassociate the persona of the critical writer from that of the fiction writer, to split yourself in half, begins to feel less necessary, a performed sincerity rather than the real thing.

My first thoughts on the quote above, as the first thoughts of someone writing a novel tend to be whenever reading *anything*, were "this could be about me." Hyde's comments on Berryman are another example of this. One curious aspect of the creative process of writing a novel is how easily other works of fiction seemed to relate directly to my own, how almost any work of criticism spoke directly to me, how an overheard conversation was dialogue I had written, or the way a tree moved in the wind was just nature ripping off one of my original ideas.<sup>1</sup> But, even with an awareness of the writer's tendency to be self-obsessive, Wood's words genuinely seemed to apply: there is no Jamesian parody in my novel – at least not intentionally – but certainly the narrator could be described as facetiously unreliable. There is, I think, a comic-pathetic inability to read warning signs. And, indeed, only the day before rereading this passage I received a rejection letter from an agent, telling me that she "felt it was difficult to enter and engage with the story in your manuscript."

However, maybe I could take solace in the knowledge that Wood had apparently misread Wallace's story. In his *LRB* review, Mason points out that Wood fails to realise that the narrator of "Oblivion" is not the repellently fussy husband but in fact his sleeping wife, lying next to him in bed. The narrative is a fitful dream in which a wife inhabits the voice of her husband. It isn't that Wood was wrong, exactly: his reading of the story certainly reduces irony and sympathy to their more puerile forms. But if a reader is attentive enough to realise the narrator's identity, a lot of Wood's complaints – the husband's pompous circumlocution, his unreliability, the suggestion of a "fantasy relationship with an invented daughter" – are understood to be aspects of the wife-character's unconscious, shifting a reader away from sarcasm and voyeurism. The problem was that Wood didn't push hard enough at the gate.

Another piece to receive negative attention in Wood's review was the last – and longest – in the collection, "The Suffering Channel". As I will discuss later, in the essay on comedy, some themes in "The Suffering Channel" were an influence on *The Gospel of Something or Other*. The story is about a magazine journalist called Skip Atwater, who writes a column

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<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith calls this experience "magical thinking": "You open the paper – *every single story in the paper is directly relevant to your novel*," (104-105). I note that she too uses the formal 'you' when writing about her own creative process. I can also report that I do not share her enthusiasm for this "magical" experience.

called WHAT IN THE WORLD. He is covering the story of Brint Moltke, a “Roto Rooter<sup>1</sup> Technician” from Indiana – formerly part of a maintenance crew in the US military during Operation Desert Storm – who is able to defecate works of art. He is a reticent, shy man, who appears ambivalent about his gift.<sup>2</sup> He is managed by his ambitions, dominant, obese, pushy, unfaithful wife, who sees in his singular ability a potential vehicle for escaping the humdrum of Midwestern American life.

To my mind, the story successfully mixes the tragic and the trivial, or rather blurs the two in order to suggest an important difficulty in determining which is which—something I was attempting to do in my own fiction. Wood, however, had no problem making a distinction, which needs to be quoted at length:

But the story, all ninety pages of it, like all the others in this book, acutely fails to move the reader. The story ends with such abruptness that suspicion stirs that it was a half-finished novel that ran out of energy. [...] And then a revealing and deeply symptomatic thing happens. Wallace tries to inject pathos, and fails. Coming out of his Indiana motel room one day, while negotiations with the Moltkes are at a delicate stage, Skip Atwater almost steps into a pile of shit, and on a piece of paper outside his door, the words "Help Me" have been formed in human excreta.

It should be a significant turning point in the story: we assume that Moltke is desperately communicating with the journalist, letting him know that his wife is bullying him into an exposure that he secretly dreads. But the scene has, instead, a giggly, juvenile weightlessness to it. Wallace never thematically develops this new information: in the ten pages that follow, and close the story, this cry for help is never referred to again. It is just dropped. And observe what Wallace does with this message:

*He [Skip] knew that great force of will would be required to try to imagine the various postures and contractions involved in producing the phrase, its detached and plumb straight underscoring, the tiny and perfectly formed quotation marks.... In a sense, the content of the message was obliterated by the overwhelming fact of its medium and implied mode of production. The phrase terminated neatly at the second E's serif; there was no tailing off or spotting.*

"There was no tailing off or spotting": how is it possible to read these words and not assume that Wallace is sniggering? The sentence about "the various postures and contractions involved in producing the phrase"--how can this be anything but a hideous lapse of tone on Wallace's part? At the scene on which the story might pivot, we have a pile of shit, and a journalist--and a writer, Wallace himself--who is busy admiring the way the shit produces a spotless "E's serif"! But Wallace cannot have it both ways. Either this is a cry for help, with some meaning and implication for the story at hand, or it is just a great big joke. It seems to be a great big joke: first, because it seems incredible that if the man really wanted to communicate with Skip, he would not choose a more direct route, such as picking up the phone or using a pen; and second, because Wallace will not deal with the message as if it matters, as if

<sup>1</sup> A North American company that specialise in cleaning obstructions from sewer lines.

<sup>2</sup> Zadie Smith notes, in the same context as the earlier reference to Hyde's *The Gift*, that Wallace was interested in 'gifts' – "To Wallace, a gift was truly an accident; a chance, fortuitous circumstance. Born intelligent, born with perfect pitch, with mathematical ability, with a talent for tennis – in what sense are we ever the proprietors of these blessings? What rights accrue to us because of them? How could we ever claim to truly own them?" (293). In "The Suffering Channel" it is clear that Wallace was also interested in how people understand the gifts of others.

it has human weight. I see no way to read the passage except as a catastrophic abrogation of authorial responsibility. In a stroke, Wallace's story itself becomes a piece of shit, an unmiraculous poo, a piece of jokey installation art that is ostensibly about grave matters--9/11, the long, dirty colon that is celebrity journalism--but is actually incapable of making good on its claim to gravity.

There are some problems with this passage, notably Wood's criticism of the method of communication being unrealistic: this is, after all, not only a story in which a man shits works of art, but one in which a large portion of the whole is dedicated to the debate over whether Atwater's magazine, *Style*, can publish an article on the man and his bizarre talent (i.e., the author is already acknowledging the absurdity).

Practicalities of communication aside, I both agreed and disagreed with Wood: I still found Moltke's plea for help to be moving, but I did not disagree with the assertion that Wallace had undermined the sense of pathos. And while it seemed clear that Wallace *intentionally* does this – that his dressing of desperation in crude comedy is an example of how easy it is to be inattentive to a pain that is not one's own, how much hard work has to be done not to be distracted or to trivialise – maybe Wood was right: there's too much hard work to be done by the reader in this story, the author's demands unreasonable. Is intentionally undermining pathos, making it much harder to earn than by deploying the conventions Wood suggests – conventions of, for want of a better term, realism – even a worthwhile endeavour?

When, earlier in his review, Wood accuses Wallace of being a proponent of the “shaggy-dog story,” he is correct, at least inasmuch as he is willing to work at deciphering Wallace's intent. The Penguin *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the shaggy-dog story as “An improbable kind of yarn, often long and spun out, which, as a rule, does *not* have a witty or surprise ending; but comes, rather, to a deflating and quasi-humorous conclusion.” This is an accurate description of the story “Oblivion” if, as Wood shows, one's reading lacks the necessary attentiveness to comprehend its conclusion. Similarly in “The Suffering Channel,” if a reader feels its considerable requests offer little compensation, the story's pathos diminishes into bathos. As Wood writes, “The shaggy-dog story is excruciating precisely because it is shaggy; and alas, that is also the only way to experience its excruciating shaggy. For many readers, this is too high a price to pay.”

There are moments in *The Gospel of Something or Other* in which this dilemma is relevant: boring or confusing or convoluted ruminations and movements in plot; sadness turned ridiculous through bombast; self-conscious attempts to dramatize the banal and intentionally fail; the aim to express simple and difficult emotions by evoking those very emotions through narrative form (repetitions, omissions, etc.), rather than successful depiction or description. The novel succeeds or fails not on whether it resists classification as a shaggy-dog story but, rather, whether it does enough to persuade a reader why someone

might be so inclined to tell a shaggy-dog story, encouraging the reader to become engaged less in the story than in the process of creating it.

How do you transfer these thoughts into some kind of thesis, to a piece of critical work that can complement your fiction without becoming simply an exegetical exercise? One way seems to be an investigation, after the event, into how these writers have influenced the creative decisions made in the fiction, how they consider some of the significant themes that arise in *The Gospel of Something or Other* – comedy, rhetorical performativity, manipulation and digression – how they react to them in other writers and how they deploy them in their own work. Although both Wallace and Wood have published fiction – the former most commonly known as a fiction writer, the latter having published one novel to date – I will spend more time discussing their non-fiction and literary criticism, where, through interrogating the writing of others, they most clearly work out their own ideas. And, since this is also an interrogation of my own creative process, I cannot claim to know exactly what my findings might be: I am, as it were, writing in the dark. I am aware that the influences of both writers run deep, that I have, over several years, read, re-read, and considered arguments each writer has put forward regarding the craft of fiction. The extent to which these arguments are a conscious and unconscious influence on the creative process is discussed in the two essays that follow.

It would be disingenuous to claim that Wallace and Wood are the sole influences on *The Gospel of Something or Other*, or even to assert that they are the major ones: many writers important to the novel are mentioned over the next two essays, many more are not mentioned at all. However, I believe that an analysis of their critical work, on specific issues of craft, can provide both a companion to my own fiction and an original comparative assessment of the stance these two important Anglophone writers have taken regarding the aesthetics and morality of the contemporary novel.

## THE FUNCTION OF COMEDY

In his introduction to *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, James Wood argues against the notion that “comedy cannot really be described or explained,” countering that this belief is only asserted by those who have “too little faith in words.” (1) In fact, claims Wood, “much comedy is explicable, exhaustively so” (1-2). To put this to the test, here are three examples:

### **James Wood**

A “pale, haggard poet” enters a pub called the Pillars of Hercules for a meeting with *The New Review* editor and poet Ian Hamilton. Hamilton offers the other poet a drink, which is declined: “Oh, no, I just can’t keep drinking.” “Well, none of us *likes* it,” replies Hamilton. (2)

### **Zadie Smith**

A man wandered out [onto the stage of a comedy club]. Going bald, early forties, schlubby, entirely nondescript. He said ‘All right?’ in a hopeless sort of way [...] then, on a large flip chart, the kind of thing an account manager in an Aylesbury marketing agency might swipe from his office, he began to write with a Magic Marker. It was a list of what not to expect from his show:

*No nudity. No juggling. No impressions of any well-known people. No reference to crop circles during the show. No one will be conceived during the show. No tackling head-on of any controversial issues. . . .*

And finally, and I think most importantly—

*No refunds.*

I recognized my father’s spirit in this list: *No good can come of this.*” (250-251)

### **David Foster Wallace**

One reason for my willingness to speak publically on a subject for which I am direly underqualified is that it affords me a chance to declaim for you a short story I have given up teaching in literature classes and miss getting to read aloud. Its English title is “A Little Fable”:

*“Alas,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.” “You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up.”*

For me, a signal frustration in trying to read Kafka with college students is that it is next to impossible to get them to see that Kafka is funny. (*Consider the Lobster*, 60-61)



The first two examples – the anecdote of Hamilton’s retort and the contextualisation of the opening of a stand-up routine by the comedian Edward Aczel – represent a comedy of character, or even caricature: if one is to enjoy the humour of either it is likely to be through an appreciation of how efficiently the joke-teller’s persona comes across, the ironic resignation of the willing alcoholic of the former and the anti-entertainer of the latter. The third, Kafka’s single paragraph story published in English in *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections*, is, as Wallace has it, “a religious humour, but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard, Rilke and the Psalms”.(64)

Smith’s example comes from an essay in memory of her late father, Aczel’s routine the kind of anti-comedy Mr Harvey Smith most enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> It is one of several examples Smith gives of how she bonded with her father over comedy. In his essay “Jokes Apart,” the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips posits that “If a joke, when it’s successful, is a transaction – an action performed, a deal done – it may be, by the same token, a communal act – the closest some of us ever get to a so-called sense of community,” and, later in the essay, “Jokes are always, however secretly, poignant because they express our longing not to be strange to each other, to ourselves, not to be too determinedly unique.” (350; 352) Phillips here is referring to the experience of jokes in a communal setting, the collective *getting* of a joke – whether as an audience of strangers in front of a stage, a family in front of a television, or a group of friends in a bar – as a temporary relief from one’s own sense of selfhood and loneliness. Removed, however, from this potential community is the joke-teller himself, the comedian on stage.

Compare the communal function of humour identified by Phillips with Smith’s reflection on her returning from university and communicating with her father:

When I returned home from my first term at Cambridge, we couldn’t discuss the things I’d learned, about Anna Karenina, or G. E. Moore, or Gawain and his staggeringly boring Green Knight, because Harvey [Smith’s father] had never learned them—but we could always speak of Basil [Basil Fawlty, of 70s UK sitcom *Fawlty Towers*]. It was a conversation that lasted decades, well beyond the twelve episodes in which Basil himself is contained. The episodes were merely jumping-off points; we carried on compulsively creating Basil long after his authors had stopped.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith terms the attraction to this sort of self-abnegating comedy “comedy nausea.” In Smith’s definition, comedy nausea occurs when the comedian becomes progressively disillusioned with the laughter of an audience, sometimes to the point of hatred. The result of this condition can be a comedian attempting to instigate laughter in more and more difficult or even perverse conditions: Smith gives examples of Tommy Cooper’s failed magician act and Peter Cook’s late prank calls to a radio station (Clive Bull’s late night talk show on *LBC*) in which he would impersonate a Norwegian immigrant who had followed his estranged wife to Swiss Cottage. The pattern is also suggestive of an addiction in which old highs no longer satisfy the craving. The narrator of *The Gospel of Something or Other* refers directly to this condition on p6-7.

Later in the essay, Smith visiting her dying father in a nursing home:

When Harvey was very ill, in the autumn of 2006, I went to visit him at a nursing home in the seaside town of Felixstowe, armed with the DVD boxed set of “Fawlty Towers.” By this point, he was long divorced from my mother, his second divorce, and was living alone on the grey East Anglian coast, far from his children. A dialysis patient for a decade (he lost his first kidney to stones, the second to cancer), his body now began to give up. I had meant to leave the DVDs with him, something for the empty hours alone, but when I got there, with nothing to talk about, we ended up watching them together for the umpteenth time, he on the single chair, me on the floor, cramped in that grim little nursing-home bedroom, surely the least funny place he’d ever found himself in—with the possible exception of the 1944 Normandy landings. We watched several episodes, back to back. We laughed. Never more than when Basil thrashed an Austin 1100 with the branch of a tree, an act of inspired pointlessness that seemed analogous to our own situation. (241-242)

In both cases, separated by over a decade, comedy is a bridging, community-creating device, whether between the associative gap of generations and education (in the first example) or the more brutal dislocation between the healthy and the terminally ill. Each example contains the poignancy Phillips suggests: the attempt to make a connection both conscious and unconscious. However, Smith’s use of “analogous” is a curious one, and the OED provides the important distinction from Smith’s usage: “comparable in certain respects, **typically in a way which makes clearer the nature of the things compared.**” Smith’s analogy compares Fawlty’s frustrations to her own: throwing “new money at the situation” of her father’s illness as he went along passively with her efforts, both refusing to verbalise the futility of attempting to buy-off terminal illness. Instead of clarifying, the comparison clouds this nature (while she may be analogous to Fawlty, and even the useless branch to “new money,” the car becomes crowded with possible metaphoric implication: her father, the National Health Service, death itself) in a way that expands on Phillips’s poignancy by acknowledging the full scope of the comedic experience: explicit in Smith’s second example is not only the attempt to establish community but also the understanding that the anodyne qualities of laughter bring only temporary relief from existential solitude. Built into the salving function of the comedy is the tragedy of temporal inevitability, which is ultimately the tragedy of finitude. However, if used simply to create temporary community, one could reductively call comedy a distraction from reality.

Smith and her father’s enjoyment of Basil Fawlty’s farce is, on the surface, in line with one of the oldest theories of comedy, Superiority Theory, which Hobbes famously sums up in *Leviathan*: “Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.”

Hobbes, like Plato and Aristotle before him, derided comedy, laughter, as an antisocial act, a base instinct that stemmed from cruelty and should be avoided. While one might still detect the residue of this theory in the idea of *schadenfreude*, it was a largely unfashionable idea by the eighteenth century. In its place, the dominant theory became that of Incongruity, the kind of linguistic refraction of meaning found in Wood's anecdote of Ian Hamilton, and, more generally, "the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations," (Morreal) of which Basil Fawlty striking his broken-down car with the flimsy tree branch is an accurate example.<sup>1</sup> The branch, of course, can do no damage: Fawlty is utterly impotent in the scene; the audience laughter stems from comprehending both the futility of the act and perversely embracing the futility, and this comprehension becomes the indistinct moment of comedic instability, where superiority may in fact become something close to *empathy*, a word James Wood pointedly avoids using.

In "The Irresponsible Self," Wood modifies the theories of Superiority and Incongruity in application to the function of comedy in the novel, identifying the comedy of "correction" and the comedy of "forgiveness". The distinction, in Wood's view, is as much one of the reliability of narration as it is the moral function of comedy. He traces corrective comedy back to Aristotle, although this relation is somewhat awkward: while Wood notes that, in *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies the need for comedy to prevent compassion in the reader/listener/audience if it is to be successful, he avoids the Platonic warning from which it came and which the *Poetics* did not argue against: namely that corrective comedy is in essence malicious and corrosive to the morality of society (i.e. the comedy of the Superiority Theory). Instead, Wood skips almost two thousand years to link Aristotle's comment on comic technique to Laurent Joubert's assertion that:

Ugliness and the lack of strong emotion were crucial to comedy. In order for comedy to work we must in the end feel a pleasure at the lack of our compassion. Thus, when a man is stripped of his clothes, the sight of his genitals is shameful and ugly, and is yet "unworthy of pity", so we laugh. (5)

Despite stretching the connections somewhat, this is an important definition. If we are able to "feel pleasure at our lack of compassion" we require a correction of sorts to distance ourselves from baseness. That the sight of genitalia is shameful might take one back to post-fall Eden, as it were, but in itself does not explain the correction that might deem it "unworthy of pity" without a consideration of ambivalence.

Joubert's *Traité du ris* (1579) – actually a work focussing on the physiology of laughter (Joubert was a physician) – argues that laughter is not simply a joyous moment of cruelty – in the purely superior sense – but a curious ambivalence where "anything

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins uses this scene as an example of Justin Barrett's HADD: hyperactive agent detection device, in which we "hyperactively detect agents where there are none, and this makes us suspect malice or benignity where, in fact, nature is only indifferent," (214)

ridiculous [the ‘ridiculous’ a catch-all for what Joubert considers the source of comedy] gives us pleasure and sadness combined.” (146) Since Joubert believed the ridiculous would always be something “ugly, deformed, dishonest, indecent, malicious and scarcely decorous,” (146) his views are not entirely removed from the Superiority Theory, but his acknowledgement of the ambivalence of sustaining pleasure and sadness is deeply suggestive of the intermingling of the comic and the tragic that Wood privileges as the creation of the modern novel.<sup>1</sup> A simple and effective contemporary example of Joubertian ambivalence can be found in Ann Lake Prescott’s essay on Sir Thomas More: “an Enron executive doing a perp walk” for whom “we feel both grief (the poor man is more or less human) and pleasure (it is good to see criminals caught).” (418) The radical notion here is not that sympathy is repressed or removed but that it is actually sustained: it becomes a component of the comedy.

Both Wood and Wallace make reference to the only occasions the Old Testament depicts God laughing – in the Psalms, always derisively – and it is generally true that the laughter of others in Christian literature tends to follow the Classical line but without the Socratic-Joubertian subtlety, as in Kings, where the callous mirth of a group of young boys laughing at Elisha’s baldness is ‘corrected’ by their mauling by two bears; the corrective legend of St Genesius, the patron saint of comedians, a pagan comedy actor in Rome who renounces mockery and embraces Christianity at the expense of his life; or “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of the fool is in the house of mirth” (Ecclesiastes, 7.4-6). However, if we dare to conceive of the embryonic secular author as the God of the fiction he creates, the notion of laughter at those “unworthy of pity” begins to make sense in the violent and cruel comedy found in the likes of Rabelais and Cervantes—Joubert’s 16th century contemporaries.<sup>2 3</sup>

For Wood, it is exclusively the modern novel that should be celebrated for developing the comedy of forgiveness, “with the huge exception of Shakespeare”. (6)<sup>4</sup> He defines the term as “secular or modern tragi-comedy” (5) that is antithetical to the corrective Aristotelian notion. He uses the comparative example of Joubert and Luigi Pirandello: the former

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<sup>1</sup> This is originally a Socratic notion: “When we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure this time with malice, mixing, that is, our pleasure with pain; for we have been some time agreed that malice is a pain in the soul, and that laughter is a pleasure, and both occur simultaneously on the occasions in question.” (97)

<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, identifies a Humanist shift in the perception of laughter that, by the sixteenth century, had undermined a great deal of its philosophical value.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of *Don Quixote*, Wood acknowledges that there are “glimpses of a newer, more complicated, more internal comedy” (11). As is discussed on the next page, Wood perhaps exaggerates the cruelty and “corrective” humour of pre-eighteenth century fiction in an attempt to buttress his argument. Elsewhere, in the *New Yorker*, Wood writes of the novel’s ability to take a reader “through different chambers of laughter: affectionate, ironic, satirical, harmonious” (Dec 22, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, Wood’s “comedy of forgiveness” is borrowed directly from R.G Hunter’s *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*.

emphasises the cruel comedy of the stage with a scenario common in sixteenth century theatre: an audience is told a beautiful maiden is about to enter a scene but encounter instead a withered old hag dressed in a younger woman's outfit. For Joubert, the comedy is in the visual correction that resolves expectation—laughter arises from observing the ugly surprise. For Pirandello, however, while there is comedy to be found in such a scene, it is tempered by the observer being compelled to “try to become the old woman in [an] attempt to sympathise with her”. (15) There is a commingling of pity and amusement in the second example, although Wood notes that any real sense of becoming the old woman (again, carefully and curiously avoiding the word empathy: what could be a better definition of empathy that “try[ing] to become” another person?) might be an “ultimately frustrated enterprise.” (15)<sup>1 2</sup>

In Wood's view, the role of the novel in the development of comedy is in creating a series of not-quitenesses: comedy is not quite cruel; not quite sympathetic. It is not quite morally corrective. Instead, it becomes something akin to Nabokov's definition of art in the introduction to his lecture on Kafka: art = beauty + pity. (251)<sup>3</sup> Nabokov suggested this was as close as one could come to a definition, acknowledging the imperfection of the formulation. Similarly, Wood acknowledges the necessary imperfection in defining the comedy of forgiveness, because it is a comedy of literal ambivalence (“an underlying emotional attitude in which the contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent” – Rycroft, 6) that is best described, as Wood sees it, by Gogol's “laughter through tears” and Freud's “the humour that smiles through tears.” (13) Wood's suggestion that the comedy of forgiveness establishes a “deliberate opacity, the drawing of a veil” is intriguing inasmuch as its output can also be applied to its definition.

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<sup>1</sup> While it suits Wood's argument to polarise Joubert and Pirandello (to credit the novel with the development of a more sympathetic comedy necessarily means he has to force a linear timeline that suggests pre-eighteenth century thought – with the exception of Shakespeare – was crueller and less sympathetic than history suggests) it is, in fact, unfair. As shown, Joubert was not blind to the poignancy of laughter, although it is true that Pirandello granted greater weight to the sympathy-component in his formulation.

<sup>2</sup> When the narrator of *The Gospel of Something or Other* makes first reference to the ‘old lady with the eggs,’ he does not attempt to “become” her but instead admits how exhaustive and difficult it would be to consider her as a fully-realised human being (48-49). David Foster Wallace's take on the idea is discussed later in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that Nabokov was particularly sensitive to the comedy of Cervantes, which Wood also classifies as corrective and pre-novelistic (in the modern sense). Brian Boyd (271-272) claims that the novel *Pnin* was written in response to Nabokov's re-reading of *Don Quixote*, his “outrage” at the book's cruelty and “implicit invitation to its readers to enjoy Don Quixote's pain and humiliation.” And *Pnin* does indeed provide a kind of reversal of revelry in cruel comedy: Pnin's escape at the end of the novel is an escape from the control of the overbearing narrator who, although claiming omniscience, is in fact a highly unreliable creation by Nabokov. The final scene of the novel – a repellent academic about to tell an inaccurate anecdote about Pnin that undermines what the reader is told in the first chapter – creates the very unreliability and uncertainty Wood claims is the essence of the comedy of forgiveness.

That David Foster Wallace considered the humour of Kafka to be “religious [...] but religious in the manner of Kierkegaard and Rilke and the Psalms,” and, later, a “harrowing spirituality,” (64) suggests that the comedy in Kafka is one of edification rather than entertainment.<sup>1</sup> The notion is enriched by Wood’s example of Kierkegaard’s “religious comedy”: “a man sitting in a glass case is not so constrained as is each human in his transparency before God”. (4-5) It is debateable whether one might laugh at this thought: the individual is ultimately pathetic because his self-knowledge is inferior to the omnipotence of God. But what if religious comedy is secularised? “If religious comedy is punishment for those who deserve it, secular comedy is forgiveness for those who don’t,” (6) Wood writes, and the absence of divine judgement as a component of this kind of comedy can indeed be filled by something like forgiveness. Consider Gregor Samsa crawling around his bedroom attempting to figure out how he can transport his insect body to the train station in order to get to work, his parents and sister worrying outside his door. Kafka’s skill, in those opening lines of “The Metamorphosis,” is to create a fantastic scenario rooted in the real: the most familiar and simplest of scenarios – waking up late for work – being easily identifiable. Any polarising categorisation breaks down here: one has to be both superior and equal to see the ridiculousness of Gregor’s situation, “not only neurotic but *anti*-neurotic, heroically sane.” (64) The comedy of forgiveness exists inasmuch as the reader who laughs at Gregor is laughing both at his ridiculousness and at how much sense his ridiculousness makes.

There are several references to being seen, literally and figuratively, through glass in Wood’s “The Irresponsible Self,” first in the desire of Momus (the Greek god of satire) for the placement of a window in the breast of man;<sup>2</sup> the Kierkegaard example; and, later, Henri Bergson’s definition of comedy as “watching people dancing to music through a window, without our being able to hear the music.”<sup>3</sup> Each time it is within the context of Wood’s comedy of correction: being seen, somehow, and exposed creates a comedy in which a character’s perception of agency is subsumed by external perceptions, whether those of other characters, an audience, or a God. This trope occurs twice in *The Gospel of Something or Other*, first when Bill is observed by the young mother holding the baby at a window in Bill Two, (36-37) and later when the narrator learns his voyeuristic observation of the elderly couple in an opposite building was itself being observed in return, without his knowledge. (136) In each case, the assumption of anonymity is undermined and a correction is made.

<sup>1</sup> The vapidness of contemporary entertainment is a constant and major theme in Wallace’s work, from the early essay “E Unibus Pluram,” to *Infinite Jest*, and all the way up to the late stories like “The Suffering Channel”.

<sup>2</sup> Borrowed by Paul Simon in his song “Graceland”: “She said [“I said” in v.2] ‘losing love is like a window in your heart / Everybody sees you’re blown apart’” *Graceland*, Warner Bros. Records, 1986, track 2, 1:53-2:04 and 3:06-3:17, reference on p52 of *The Gospel of Something or Other*.

<sup>3</sup> A seemingly intentional clunky unfunny line. As pointed out by Dr Samuel Trainor in the viva for this very PhD, Wood misquotes significantly from Bergson’s *Le Rire*. Bergson places the observer in a ballroom, sticking his fingers in his ears whilst watching two people dancing to music.

*Fidelity to Unreliability*

Wood states that the comedy of forgiveness succeeds through unreliable narration, or, as he also terms it, the ‘irresponsible self’. As he noted in *How Fiction Works*, the ‘unreliable narrator’ is often much more reliable than a standard omniscient third-person narrative, primarily because the former must teach the reader to become familiar with their unreliability. (6-7) While more detailed discussion of narrative occurs in the following essay, Wood’s understanding of the comic function of a *truly* unreliable narrator (i.e. one that does not adhere to any guiding patterns or knowing winks to the reader) is important in a consideration of how Wallace sought to explain the more moral and edifying comedy in Kafka and how he attempted to deploy it in his own work.

In “Big Red Son,” (*Consider the Lobster*, 3-50)<sup>1</sup> a long essay covering the 1998 Adult Video News Awards (AVN), the pleasure Wallace takes in deriving comedy from his surroundings is palpable, whether in the inflated caricatures of the industry professionals,<sup>2</sup> the frequently noted grammatical errors of industry literature (the 12/11/97 press release issued by AVN is provided in full: the four-bullet-point document includes five *sic erat scriptums* by Wallace), or in his own ambivalence to the curious one-sided intimacy such an event can instigate:

It is difficult to describe how it feels to gaze at living human beings whom you’ve seen perform in hard-core porn. To shake the hand of a man whose precise erectile size, angle, and vasculature are known to you. That strange I-think-we’ve-met-before sensation one feels upon seeing any celebrity in the flesh is here both intensified and twisted. (16)

Wallace’s journalistic reliability in this essay has been questioned: *Premiere* received several letters of complaint from AVN employees. Some took umbrage at suggestions that the awards voting procedure lacked transparency and might perhaps have been rigged; others claimed the published article displayed an anti-porn agenda.<sup>3</sup> However, Wallace’s narratorial reliability is more consistent, creating a distance between author and subject: any occasion

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<sup>1</sup> First published as “Neither Adult, nor Entertainment” in *Premiere* )

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes literally: “One of the B-girls, meanwhile, is explaining that she has just gotten a pair of cutting-edge breast implants that she can actually adjust the size of by adding or draining fluid via small valves under her armpits, and then – perhaps mistaking your correspondents’ expressions for ones of disbelief – she raises her arms to display the valves. There really are what appear to be valves.” (29)

<sup>3</sup> The letters can be found on the Wallace fansite *Howling Fantods*. It is important to note that the original *Premiere* article was published anonymously and that Wallace was not the known author at the time.

for the first-person pronoun is replaced with “your correspondents” (later “yr. corresps.”<sup>1</sup>), the effect of which is not dissimilar to the Hobbesian self-applause of superiority: the repetition of the collective and job-specific pronoun insists the *otherness* of the correspondent from his subject, another anonymous observer. This is explicitly intentional on Wallace’s part, and his motives become clear once we are introduced to the villain of the essay.

Max Hardcore (born Paul Little), an American pornography producer, director and actor, is introduced by Wallace as “somewhere between 40 and 60 years old and resembl[ing] more than anything a mesomorphic and borderline-psycho Henry Gibson.” (25) There is no attempt at objectivity or impartiality in his depiction, as he is referred to variously as a “total psychopath,” and “looking at once magisterial and mindless,” (30) while, at the AVN ceremony itself, it is celebrated with “immense and unkind delight” that Hardcore fails to win an award. (46) The individual Wallace describes is difficult to take seriously as anything other than a caricature, one who enthusiastically shares a scrawled note that reads “I’m a little fuckhole,” supposedly written by a female actor with “a Magic Marker [stuck] up her asshole,” (31) and refers to all the women he employs as “little girls.”<sup>2</sup> However, Wallace’s most forceful act of condemnation is not in what he depicts but in what he refuses to depict. In a parenthetical aside, Wallace comments that Hardcore’s biography – which Hardcore himself tells in full – is “a tale too literally incredible to even think about fact checking and trying to print.” (27) Three pages later the topic of Hardcore’s personal history returns: “There then follows a torrent of autobiography and background that yr. corresps. have decided to deny Max the satisfaction of seeing reproduced here.” (30) The repetition of refusal to provide biographical detail is a radical and ethical act on Wallace’s part: yr. corresps. determine that the subject deserves none of the potential compassion or sympathy a fully depicted individual might receive, fixing Hardcore as an immoral caricature. There is a Joubertian pleasure in this lack of compassion as Hardcore becomes not only the butt of the joke but the joke itself. The reader’s laughter, like Wallace’s, becomes the scornful sort of the Superiority Theory and of God in the Psalms.

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<sup>1</sup> From the edition notice of *Consider the Lobster*, on “Big Red Son”: “the original article appeared [in print] bi-pseudonymously and now for odd and hard-to-explain reasons doesn’t quite work if the “we” and “your correspondents” thing gets singularized”.

<sup>2</sup> Only a month after the essay was published, Paul Little was charged with child pornography and the distribution of obscene material. The charges were later dismissed. In 2008 he was convicted on charges of obscenity.



*Leaving Out the Important Stuff*

A central and consistent theme in Wood's sense of the function of comedy is the power of omission. In "The Irresponsible Self," he identifies Freud's 'broken humour' – in which an expected emotion is blocked by a moment of comedy – as a technique for intensifying the potential for sympathy. (13) In his review of Lydia Davis's work, Wood again praises the effects of omission. Davis, Wood notices, provides the sparest detail for characters in her stories, several times a narrator's referent being described as 'a man' or 'a man I know'. (*The Fun Stuff*, 173) The withholding of what might be considered reasonable detail – information a reader would naturally expect the narrator to provide – creates a detachment between narrator and subject. This detachment is somewhat comic (playfully subverting expectations) and somewhat tragic (if a reader is encouraged to consider the reasons why the narrator might avoid detail—the implication in Davis's case is that the 'man' in many of her stories is an ex-husband or ex-lover). The poignancy of omission is contained in the subtlety of its execution, a kind of narrative quirk that comes about as a consequence of the fragile human condition. Executed well, the omission of important detail, much like the incongruity of Basil Fawlty thrashing his car with a tree branch, enables readers to sympathise with the character they observe by recognising the universality it represents. Wallace's repeated acknowledgement of his omission of Hardcore's biography, the near-violence of it, resists the potential for sympathy by refusing to allow the development from flat caricature into a real self.

Omission is not used to moralise action in *The Gospel of Something or Other* in quite the way Wallace does in "Big Red Son," but rather to enhance characterisation and give at least the *opportunity* for sympathy, albeit within a discomfiting context: the narrator's almost-connection with the child and mother in the park (208-209) is an example of this. Connection for the narrator is often mistaken as a sense of control, whether the control of an audience, of Bill, of Grace; and these attempts at control are normally subverted—the old detective's literary criticism that overrides the narrator's authority during their interview; (127-135) the old lady's revelation that she and her husband had actually been watching the narrator watching them. (137) Again, in the park, there are initial attempts to control proceedings: the narrator directing both the girl and her mother as he draws them. The inevitable pattern of correction continues when the mother approaches and looks at the drawing. The omission – of what was actually drawn instead of the posing child and parent – doesn't result solely in the narrator being a Max Hardcore-like butt of the joke but creates two jokes and two victims: first, the mother-character is reduced to a joke when her assumption that a stranger wished to depict her and her daughter is corrected; and second, the narrator becomes a joke because whatever he drew on the page cannot be known: the action is merely a repetition of the statement of the novel's first page: "I'm fated to misjudge a room." If this effect is

successful, the opportunity for sympathy exists inasmuch as the reader acknowledges the narrator's failure to make a human connection. Empathy, however, is denied, for one cannot entirely understand, or "become" in Pirandello's sense, the narrator if a full knowledge of his actions is withheld.

A recurring rhetorical conceit of omission is also employed throughout *The Gospel of Something or Other* with the references to the narrator's 'ignominy'. Here, the device is initially not dissimilar to the cinematic MacGuffin, seemingly elusive and potentially meaningless, until the novel reaches its close and the ignominy is revealed to be the recording and public sharing of the narrator's scatological sex act. Partly, this is in homage to two influences. The first is Wallace's short story "The Suffering Channel," (*Oblivion*, 238-329) which closes with a character creating/defecating 'art' on camera in the World Trade Centre buildings moments before the Sept. 11 catastrophe. Wallace's point, or one of them, is perhaps that art is always contextualised by the tragic, and, if art loses a sense of tragedy, it can be viewed as little more than a curio, which, as the narrator remarks regarding pornography (and is also applicable to 'comedy nausea'), results in the addict-output of a demand for excess. For the narrator of *The Gospel of Something or Other*, who is chronically compelled to inflate his own tragedies, his actions are not governed by contextualisation.

The second homage is to Francis Hutcheson, a former professor of philosophy at Glasgow University and, as noted by Andrew Stott, one of the earliest challengers to the Hobbesian ethical objection to laughter. (180-181) In his *Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees* – a collection of three essays on laughter originally published in *The Dublin Journal*, 1725 – Hutcheson offers a series of hypotheticals designed to undermine Hobbes's belief that laughter is always essentially cruel and superior. One of these scenarios is that of a "person of great gravity, ability, dignity" going to the toilet, or performing "the natural functions which we study to conceal from sight." (Broadie, 234) This is an important reaction to the suggestion that laughter is an act of superiority, for, like Gregor or Basil, laughter at the dignified individual on the toilet contains within it the recognition that we have something in common with the object of our amusement.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the narrator of *The Gospel of Something or Other* does not "study to conceal from sight" his actions, but rather assumes he has some control over who is able to observe him. That the private becomes public is a correction of his hubris and ignorance, the ease at which

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<sup>1</sup> Discussing Hutcheson's toilet hypothetical, Stott considers its success to be in the "combination of high and low in a single scene" (p180): the dignified and respectable individual completing an undignified act. This intermingling of 'high' and 'low' is exactly what Wood celebrates in the sentences of Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theatre*, which conform "to the well-known definition of dirt – matter out of place, which is itself the mixing of high and low dictions" (*How Fiction Works*, p151). The sentence of Roth's Wood chokes to quote (also quoted in an earlier chapter of this essay) includes the etymology of the word *exuberant*, a reference to Tintoretto, and the protagonist's extra-marital lover exclaiming "I feel it deep down in my cunt". How this is distinguished from Wallace's style is discussed in the next essay.

the event occurs a response to the ease of the action (in the sense of the narrator's ability to instigate the transaction rather than the ease of the movement itself) that preceded it.<sup>1</sup>

A third omission occurs with the narrative of Emily. At the end of the novel's first paragraph, the narrator promises to "give you Emily," and indeed does provide a snatch of Emily's narrative in the closing pages (p210), and ends with her suicide note. However, this is a false inversion of Wallace's refusal to provide Hardcore his biography: while the narrator offers Emily's voice he never releases it from his control, and it remains completely contextualised by his own authority. The snippets of her own 'voice' that precede the suicide note are either reproduced with editorial commentary or paraphrased entirely, with the exception of Emily's account of trying to say she loved the rain. The fact that the narrator chooses to briefly mention only a few of "perhaps twenty-five" long ("they were all long") emails undermines any sense that Emily is being faithfully represented.

### *What Isn't Water*

Perhaps Wallace's most famous joke – or "parable-ish stor[y]" – is the opening of his commencement speech given to graduates of Kenyon College in May 2005, the transcript posthumously published as *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. It goes as follows:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?"

And the two fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" (3-4)

The joke/parable originally appeared in Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, in a slightly different form, told by the character Bob Death:

This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away. (445)

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<sup>1</sup> When the private does indeed become public, the narrator's parenthetical aside notes that "there was also some laughter, albeit a reticent sort. If I'm reading Freud correctly that kind of thing happens sometimes." (198). This is a direct reference to the 'laughter of relief' Freud posited in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which has been termed by others, such as Adam Phillips, as the "laughter of unease" and defined as humanity's "rather ingenious ways of getting pleasure from things we find unacceptable" ("The Joy of Sex and Laughter", 14-22). In the Freudian sense, the reticent laughter of the audience is the collective release of the physical energy latent in the communal recognition of the previously unconscious taboo.

In his book on existentialism in contemporary North American fiction, Allard den Dulk notes the similarity here to the Dave Eggers short story “What the Water Feels Like to the Fishes,”<sup>1</sup> suggesting both Eggers and Wallace are concerned with “challenging [humans] to take a good look at reality and try to describe it.” (112) Whether a challenge or merely an observation that reality is “so hidden in plain sight all around us,” (131) – neither the story nor Wallace’s versions of the parable determine a fixed description for what water actually *is* to the fish – the fish parable of *This is Water* is a textbook example of both Incongruity Theory and Wood’s definition of the comedy of forgiveness: there is a brief glimmer in hearing the pay-off, where the listener understands that, just like a fish, he or she is very easily ignorant to the most elemental of our surroundings.

That Wallace would recycle a parable he wrote a decade earlier for a commencement speech suggests that *This is Water* is not only emblematic of the thematic arc of his oeuvre but that it can, to some extent, show how Wallace saw the potential for fiction to create a better world. His examples of the mundane frustrations of “seemingly meaningless routines,” (74) like grocery shopping and traffic jams, become problematic inasmuch as their tedium numb collective empathy. Wallace suggests the remedy to the “automatic, unconscious belief I am the centre of the world” (83) is the will of the imagination to “force [oneself] to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket checkout line is probably just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people actually have much harder, more tedious lives than I do,” (86) or that, in a traffic jam:

It's not impossible that some of these people in SUVs have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so traumatic that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive; or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to rush to the hospital, and he's in a way bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am-it is actually *I* who am in *his* way. (86)

While this is not quite Pirandello’s “becoming” the old woman, Wallace’s creation of fictional hypotheses – using the full-range of one’s imagination to evoke sympathy – is a simple suggestion to encourage individuals not to privilege their own experience over others, a kind of long-hand version of Schopenhauer’s recommendation that “the appropriate form of address between man and man ought to be, not monsieur, sir, but *fellow sufferer, compaignon de misères*. (*On the Suffering of the World*, 15, referenced in *The Gospel of Something or Other*, 50) In “Getting Away from it All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche’s Concept of Oblivion,” (*The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, 25-52) Josh Roiland accurately notes, within the common trope of escapism that is

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<sup>1</sup> This is a single-paragraph story that begins with fish attempting to describe the human question ‘what does the water feel like to you?’ After several attempts, the fishes reverse the question: ‘What does the air feel like to you?’

often the subject, the recurrence of thematic sadness in Wallace's non-fiction, whether writing about politics, pornography, sport or vacations. (29) And, in *This is Water*, the experiences – and methods for coping with them more sympathetically – of supermarket shopping and driving at rush hour are imbued with a sense of sadness: each of Wallace's examples of how to navigate such dull-yet-difficult situations are through the creation of tragic fictions, the reminder that everyone suffers. While Roiland argues that, in the essays on John McCain, the AVN awards, the several essays on tennis, and on various 'vacations' (cruise ships, lobster fairs, state fairs), Wallace identifies the "American phenomenon" of "supplanting everyday reality with fantasy," (29) a different kind of fantasy is actually encouraged by the author in *This is Water*: one that advocates not a *distraction* from sadness but an acknowledgement of it. This is an important component in Wallace's parable as to how we can understand the metaphor of 'water' as a kind of punchline.

In 1943, Ray Lepley was an academic in the philosophy department of Bradley Polytechnic Institute in Peoria, Illinois<sup>1</sup> (Peoria provides the setting for a large part of Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*). In his paper, "The Identity of Fact and Value," he uses the term "this is water," or a slight variant of it ("this is good water," "this is what in English is called water") twelve times, each to denote the "recognition that every experience, however restricted, involves both object or objective and interested subject," and "the potentialities for factual and valuative statement [...] are co-extensive." (126) While it is not known whether Wallace ever read Lepley's paper, the potential for the term "this is water" to denote both the objective and subjective appeals to Wallace's unpacking of his parable as the acknowledgement that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about." (*This is Water*, 8) Hardest to talk about because, as Georges Bataille defines laughter, they reside "in that place where nothing counts anymore – neither the 'object', nor the 'subject'". (qtd. Stott, 186) When Wallace says, and repeats, "this is water" toward the end of his speech, he cannot be unaware that it is not an effective representation of "important realities" but something closer to Derrida's *différance*, "a way of thinking of language as a structure of infinite referral and deferral, in which there are no meaningful terms, only traces of them." (qtd. Stott, 187) *This is water, this is water*: the resolving punchline to a joke we cannot quite *get*, because not getting it is the point, the "willingness to let obscurity go free." (*The Irresponsible Self*, 6)

Roiland incorrectly states that Wallace ends his commencement speech by "urging the students to cultivate simple awareness of the seemingly obvious; to repeat the mantra of the enlightened older fish: 'This is water. This is water.'" (44) The speech actually ends with the more ominous "I wish you way more than luck." (137) However, the larger mistake is that Wallace never attributes the repetition to the older fish, only the line "Morning boys.

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<sup>1</sup> Now Bradley University

How's the water?" (3) The older fish does not return to answer the question "what the hell is water?" The parable-joke is not resolved by the assertion of what water *is*, but that the young fish are ignorant to its existence.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is Wallace himself who repeats the phrase, (132-133) the rhetorical urgency seeming to insist on a metaphoric interpretation.

In "The All and the If: God and Metaphor in Melville," (*The Broken Estate*, 29-47) Wood discusses Melville's heightened "devotion to the logic of the metaphor," (40) which manifests in a sensitivity to the transformative effect metaphor has on its subjects: "as soon as you liken x to y, x has changed, and is now x+y, which has its own, parallel life." (40) Returning to the subject of Melville and metaphor in a lecture at St Anne's College, Oxford, Wood discusses a conversation between the evolutionary biologist and 'new atheist' Richard Dawkins and the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams regarding the nature of belief in Christian miracles.<sup>2</sup> Dawkins posits that the virgin birth, resurrection, etc. can only be viewed as metaphors, while Williams insists they are ultra-metaphoric. However, when pushed, Williams is forced to admit he does not accept the literal truth of these miracles, and instead attempts to explain his position with the use of further figurative language.<sup>3</sup> Wood sees in this exchange a similarity with Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the crux of which, in Wood's opinion, is whether God can be described literally or only through metaphor: "Melville [...] seems to be terrified by the idea that if God cannot be reached by metaphor, then God is only a metaphor."

As Wallace writes in regard to Kafka's "A Little Fable," it is "just about impossible" to "unpack and organise the various signification networks behind *mouse, world, running, walls, narrowed, chamber, trap, cat, and cat eats mouse.*" (*Consider the Lobster*, 62) In contrast to Melville, who "uses scores of different metaphors to capture the beast [the whale that is "symbolic of both the devil and God"], and fails," (Wood, "The New Atheism") Kafka's writing is laden with subversively simple associations that make pinning down a clear metaphor difficult. In the seemingly straight-forward calculation  $x = y$ , what happens when y is too unstable a number to be quantified? *This is Water*, as a metaphor, becomes unquantifiable because, if x is water, y is variously "awareness of what is so real and essential," (131) liv[ing] consciously," (135) "the truth, with a whole lot of rhetorical bullshit pared away," (125) and "real freedom." (121) If we consider that Wallace identified comedy in Kafka as "pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it" and that "finally the door opens ... and it opens *outward* – we've been inside what we wanted all along," (*Consider the Lobster*, 65) we sense that what is important, and

<sup>1</sup> James Wood is fond of referencing Chekhov's assertion that good literature should not judge or reach conclusions but only ask the right questions. (*The Broken Estate*, 55; *How Fiction Works*, 135)

<sup>2</sup> Published in an adapted version in *The Guardian* as "The New Atheism"

<sup>3</sup> Rather than simply being metaphors, they are "'Spaces' when history opens up to its own depths, and something like what we call a 'miracle' might occur," as Wood has it.

importantly comic, is not *what water is* but that we, like young fish, never quite know the answer to the question, or even quite what the question means.

The narrator ends his closing section of *The Gospel of Something or Other* ruminating that his situation – having to lie prone on the floor after eye surgery – “sounds like a metaphor for something or other”. His compulsion to seek applicable metaphors for his own situation ends in failure, and his final state – being temporarily half-blind (which is, of course, not blind at all) – is a punchline of sorts: it is almost a correction but not quite; almost a metaphor but not quite. There is hope, maybe, but it is only finite: the narrator’s consideration of the parallels between the Stations of the Cross and endings in cinema and literature (40-41) is evoked once again in his final line in the novel.<sup>1</sup> It is the omission of a resolution to the fiction that also fails to resolve the problem the narrator identifies earlier in the novel regarding endings: “and then everyone dies.”

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<sup>1</sup> “I’m tired, lying here, and finding it difficult to remember the last station of the cross..” 210

## SINCERITY AND MANIPULATION

In a review of John Updike's novel *Towards the End of Time* originally published in the *New York Observer* (*Consider the Lobster*, 51-59) David Foster Wallace coined the acronym GMN, or "Great Male Narcissists". The term applied to three American novelists each accused, as Wallace had it, of solipsism in the dominant strain of modern<sup>1</sup> American literary fiction: Updike, Norman Mailer and Philip Roth. Wallace goes on to state that the period in which each of these writers was most prolific (circa 1960-1980) was "probably the single most self-absorbed generation since Louis XIV<sup>2</sup>".

Updike's novel is set in a post-Sino-American nuclear war near future, the narrative provided through central character Ben Turnbull's diary entries. The review deals with the text empirically, damningly tallying pages dedicated to particular topics:

"Total # of pages about Sino-American war: 0.75. Total # of pages about golf: 15. Total # of pages about what life's like in Boston proper without municipal services or police, plus whether the war's nuclear exchanges have caused fallout or radiation sickness: 0.0. Total # of pages about Ben Turnbull's penis and his various thoughts and feelings about it: 10.5."

This is one of Wallace's most straight-forward pieces of non-fiction. It rarely strays from discussion of Updike's work, and spends 5.5 of its 8 pages specifically on the novel in question. It is exegetic, analysing plot, language and the novels place in the author's oeuvre. It provides ample quotation.<sup>3</sup> Wallace does not treat it predominately as an occasion for grand literary statements, as is the case with some essays ("E Unibus Pluram," "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky" and "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness," for example, all provide Wallace a platform to discuss the difficulty in overcoming the manifold corrosion contemporary irony has inflicted on fiction). It is also unmistakably Wallace: his prose possessing the "distinctive singular stamp" he praises in the works of Dickens, Chekhov, Woolf, Salinger, Coetzee and Ozick; the quality he describes as "a vibe, a kind of perfume of sensibility," considering the more common term "style" both reductive and "almost universally lame." (*Consider the Lobster*, 264) Passages like the following are immediately identifiable as Wallacian:

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, one imagines, the fifty-year period beginning with Mailer's 1948 *The Naked and the Dead*.

<sup>2</sup> A comment recycled from his 1997 interview on *Charlie Rose* (PBS).

<sup>3</sup> In 2001, Wallace wrote a review with a similar conceit: *The Best of the Prose Poem for Rain Taxi Review of Books*. The review uses the same percentage summations, but with flagrantly subjective assertions and very little quotation. One might assume Wallace is treating the topic (what is a prose poem, exactly?) with the seriousness he thinks it deserves. Still, there are moments of generosity towards writers he likes: number of poems that "are so great you end up not caring what genre they're supposed to be a part of: 9"



I'm guessing that for the young educated adults of the sixties and seventies, for whom the ultimate horror was the hypocritical conformity and repression of their own parents' generation, Updike's ejection of the libidinous self appeared refreshing and even heroic. But young adults of the nineties – many of whom are, of course, the children of all the impassioned infidelities and divorces Updike wrote about so beautifully, and who got to watch all this brave new individualism and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation – today's subforties have very different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness: the prospect of dying without even once having loved someone more than yourself. Ben Turnbull, the narrator of Updike's latest novel, is sixty-six years old and heading for just a death, and he's shitlessly<sup>1</sup> scared. (54)

Since Wallace's death his contemporary, Jonathan Franzen, has written and published several pieces about their relationship, and Wallace's work. At Wallace's memorial service in 2008, Franzen praised Wallace's ability to shift rapidly between registers, including: "high, low, middle, technical, hipster, nerdy, philosophical, vernacular, vaudevillian, hortatory, tough-guy, brokenhearted [and] lyrical diction." (*Farther Away*, 164) It is worth considering not just these labels, but the rhetorical implications of the diverse shifts Franzen observes.

First, the labels: Franzen's first two descriptions are familiar. In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood praises "the mixing of high and low dictions" in Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theatre*. (151) But which apply most to Wallace?

- High – yes: "Updike's ejection of the libidinous self." Severed from astronomical usage, "ejection" requires one to consider the Latin *ejectio*: "to carry out or up" or "exalt" – *OED*
- Low – yes, although in a different way from Wood's identification in Roth: the high-low in *Sabbath's Theatre* is one of conflating (moderately) high-brow references and vulgarity: "Juno lying prone in Tintoretto's painting where the Milky Way is coming out of her tit." (13) There is less a shift between registers as an admixture of poise and puerility. The high and low registers in Wallace tend to be a confluence of esoteric (ejection) and colloquial ("I'm guessing," "got to watch all this"), with specific rhetorical intentions (more of which later).
- Middle: an odd word selection from Franzen. The well-established admixture of high and low registers in fiction is an indication of skill, while "middle," with its connotations of middle-brow seems like the faintest of praise. Still, if he simply means lucid and

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<sup>1</sup> "Shitlessly" bearing an irony in itself here: without shit; you're scared but not enough to shit yourself, yet one must assume being shitlessly scared is somehow scarier than simply being *scared*. Quite possibly an example of "hipster" diction.

conventional prose, certainly there's plenty in Wallace (as one would expect of any writer).

- Technical – yes, although the passage above does not display Wallace's ability to turn his voice into that of an experienced practitioner of whatever craft he's discussing. Consider the following, picked, as Wallace often writes, "almost at random":

Like nearly all members of the paid press, Skip Atwater watched a good deal of satellite TV, much of it marginal or late night, and knew the O Verily glyph quite well. He still had contacts among R. Vaughn Corliss's support staff because of the All Ads All The Time Channel piece, which O Verily had ended up regarding as a fortuitous part of its second wave marketing. The AAATC was still up and pulling in a solid cable share, although response to the insertion of real paid ads within the stream of artefact ads had not had the dynamic impact on revenues the O Verily's prospectus had promised it very well might. (*Oblivion*, 289)

Using another extract from the same short story, James Wood calls this prose "hideously ugly, and painful for more than a page or two." (*How Fiction Works*, 27) It is, however, a staple of Wallace's prose, fiction and non-, where narrative voices adopt a near-suffocating closeness to their subjects and are driven relentlessly by the communal vernacular of their loci.

- "Hipster," "toughguy" and (perhaps to a lesser extent) "nerdy" are all similar examples of Wallace inhabiting various voices, but each are loaded terms. Since this is primarily a discussion of Wallace's non-fiction, and these topics each deserve more than cursory attention, I'll move on. However, it's worth noting that while these categories of narrative voice could potentially lead a writer into sneering parody, Wallace tends to be kinder: there's little inclination to merely mock in his writing, little desire for the author to be above his subject<sup>1</sup>, which may be why one of his significant aesthetic narrative choices was for his prose to be consumed by the voices of his characters.
- Hortatory – it is difficult to know whether Franzen is conflating *earnest* and *passionate* in this term – since 'hortatory' is a rhetorical style that fits awkwardly with his other categories – or whether he intentionally classifies it as a 'register,' from which it is reasonable to infer he is suggesting the presence of a similar kind of artifice in Wallace's exhortations to that in his lexical versatility.

In his *LRB* review of Wallace's last short story collection *Oblivion*, Wyatt Mason noted the technique of "meld[ing] hortatory optimism with experiential pragmatism" in Wallace's non-

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<sup>1</sup> "But I gotta tell you, I just think to look across the room and automatically assume that somebody else is less aware than me, or that somehow their interior life is less rich, and complicated, and acutely perceived than mine, makes me not as good a writer. Because that means I'm going to be performing for a faceless audience, instead of trying to have a conversation with a person." (David Foster Wallace, qtd. *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* 41)

fiction.<sup>1</sup> Two issues sprout from this description: one is what, exactly, Wallace attempts to exhort in his prose, and in what ways; the other is whether the apparent earnestness, the shifts into ‘low’ diction and shmucksisms, are evidence of sincerity or manipulation.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Allure of the Schmuck*

In David Lipsky’s *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself*, an interview conducted over five days on the road for the *Infinite Jest* book tour, Wallace responds to Lipsky’s compliment regarding the success of his non-fiction:

In those essays that you like in Harper’s,<sup>3</sup> there’s a certain persona created, that’s a little stupider and schmuckier than I am. (41)

The inflation of schmuckiness is evident in different ways. At its most harmless, it provides the comic effect of a man being somewhere other, where the deadpan colloquial delivery of ironic observation, like noticing how, on a cruise ship, the many things that were “wood-grain but not real wood were such marvellous and painstaking imitations of wood that a lot of times it seemed like it would have been simpler and less expensive simply to have used real wood.” (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 285, fn. 49) Still, this skeumorphic noticing deploys several rhetorical conceits that flirt with clunky writing in order to produce maximum comic effect: the repetition (wood-grain, real wood, of wood, would, real wood; simpler, simply) and periphrasis (“that a lot of times it seemed”); the juxtaposition of exaggeration (marvellous, painstaking) and banality (he’s talking about imitation wood, after all). Written more concisely (‘effective imitations of wood appeared so painstaking to create it often seemed simpler and cheaper to use real wood’) the sentence’s irony and humour are diluted. And then there’s “painstaking,” which is the crux of the sentence’s (and joke’s) logic. That the imitation wood is “marvellous” doesn’t persuade a

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is used specifically in reference to Wallace’s “Tense Present: Democracy, English and the Wars over Usage” essay, collected in *Consider the Lobster*.

<sup>2</sup> The “New Sincerity” term has been applied to Wallace and his contemporaries by Harvard fellow Adam Kelly in his essay “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity in American Fiction” (*Consider David Foster Wallace* 131-144). Kelly traces the term back to a 1993 essay by the film critic Jim Collins. However, the origins can be found in the alternative rock scene of 80s Austin, Texas, attributed to writer/musician Jesse Sublett as a “throwaway remark” he made to the journalist Margaret Moser (Barry Shank’s *Dissonant Identities: The Rock n’ Roll Scene in Austin, Texas*, 271, footnote 84). The musical definition applies to the antithetical reaction to production excesses in popular 80s rock music: the result being a stripped-down and often technically limited style (as with punk, one’s left to determine for oneself whether said limitations are always aesthetic choices or not). In fiction, Kelly relies on Lionel Trilling’s definition of sincerity in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) as “a congruence of avowal and actual feeling,” before discussing Wallace’s attempts to write with sincerity post-postmodernism. The closest occasions Wallace himself came to a pithy definition was in *E Unibus Pluram* (“single-entendre principles” *Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 81) and *Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky* (“morally passionate, passionately moral fiction,” *Consider the Lobster*, 274).

<sup>3</sup> The monthly US magazine that regularly published Wallace

reader that real wood might be a better alternative, but “painstaking,” implying difficult, precise and costly physical labour, might. While it’s fair to think the unnecessary excesses of the culture being addressed are reflected in the language, Wallace’s regular-guy (maybe “tough-guy”? Or “broken-hearted-tough-guy”?) -voice lulls the reader into letting slide by almost unnoticed the fact that there is no evidence to back up “painstaking,” and that the cruise ship manufacturers most likely chose imitation wood because it is far cheaper.<sup>1</sup>

But this is merely a comic observation in a footnote to an essay on cruise ships. What happens when this rhetoric is applied to more literary concerns?

In an essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Elaine Blair identifies Wallace’s review of John Updike as one example of the overt and earnest sensitivity the contemporary male American novelist has developed towards the ‘female literary reader,’ as well as a hyper-awareness of potential misogyny in their own work. Wallace’s essay is an ideal reference for Blair, as it identifies the reasons for these anxieties (the aforementioned GMN’s) and displays his own:

Most of the literary readers I know personally are under forty, and a fair number are female, and none of them are big admirers of the postwar GMNs. But it’s John Updike in particular that a lot of them seem to hate. And not merely his books, for some reason—mention the poor man himself and you have to jump back:

“Just a penis with a thesaurus.”

“Has the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought?”

“Makes misogyny seem literary the same way Rush [Limbaugh] makes fascism seem funny.”

And trust me: these are actual quotations, and I’ve heard even worse ones, and they’re all usually accompanied by the sort of facial expressions where you can tell there’s not going to be any profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy or talking about the sheer aesthetic pleasure of Updike’s prose. (*Consider the Lobster*, 52-53)

In quoting the above, Blair suggests Wallace has reductively imagined the tastes of his hypothetical female reader, and identifies a tone of condescension (“trust me,” “even worse,” “[no] profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy,” etc.). She is, however, less damning of his manipulation: the most curious aspect of this passage is its bequeathing of his criticism to the imagined female reader, and his anecdotal exasperation at the notion of *explaining* Updike’s talents to her. Two pages later we have Wallace counting the penis-related pages of the novel.

As for the quoted female opinions on Updike, one might consider what Wallace said in conversation with David Lipsky the year prior to publishing his review of *Toward the End of Time*:

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<sup>1</sup> Which is how you ruin a perfectly good joke

[...] Updike, I think, has never had an unpublished thought. And [...] he's got an ability to put it in very lapidary prose. But that Updike presents one with a compressed Internet problem, is there's 80 percent absolute *dreck*, and 20 percent priceless stuff. And you just have to wade through so much purple gorgeous empty writing to get to anything that's got any kind of heartbeat in it. Plus, I think he's mentally ill.

*You really do, don't you?*

Yeah. I think he's a *nasty* person. And I'll tell you, if you think I hate him? Talk to—bring up his name [to J. Franzen]. (*Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself*, 92-93)

Not only does this undermine Wallace's 'assurances' early in his review that he is a fan of Updike, but the repetition of the first sentence of this quotation Wallace attributes to an unnamed female is a curious form of dislocation, in which subjective opinion is replaced by a kind of communal consensus: a demographic group perception rather than his own opinion. While it is difficult to know if Wallace really did survey the opinions of his female friends – re-gendered his own views to criticise Updike from a different angle – or attribute Franzen's opinions to an imagined group of female readers, the fact that each option is plausible goes some way to determining the extent to which Wallace was willing to bend the rules of non-fiction to suit his broader intentions.<sup>1</sup>

The possession, containment and release of a female narrative are key themes of *The Gospel of Something or Other*. The suggestion that reported female speech lacks transparency – that there is an authorial opaqueness between reader and subject – does not require investigation: it is asserted in various ways as the novel unfolds, from the narrator admitting he fabricated aspects of Emily's conversation, to his acknowledging that the interviews in appendices one and three are "completed entirely from memory." (130) Even the ostensible candour of the narrator's final gesture, providing Emily's suicide note, struggles with an uncomfortable duality: it is impossible to determine if the brief authorial annotation at the beginning of appendix five is an earnest attempt at sincerity or a rhetorical manipulation. And to *attempt* sincerity must, after all, be a kind of conceit.

In his essay *David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity in American Fiction*, Adam Kelly acknowledges Lionel Trilling's distinction between *sincerity* and *authenticity* that arose, he asserts, in the twentieth-century: "Whereas sincerity places emphasis on inter-subjective truth and communication with others, and on what Trilling calls the "public end in view," authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication" (132). The narrator of *GoSoO* faces a dilemma between these very definitions: he has a clear conviction that there is a reader – although it is unclear who the implied reader might be – and performs a series

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<sup>1</sup> This is covered in various parts of the DT Max biography, *Every Ghost Story is a Love Story*.

of misdirections and ‘confessions’ as the narrative unfolds. The most evident performativity of sincerity is perhaps in the “Present Moment” bordered entries in the ‘Notes’ sections of Part Two.

Loosely, the structure of Part Two follows the Platonic distinction between mimesis (imitation) and diegesis (narration/storytelling): the former an acting-out of the narrator’s few days after Emily’s suicide through the character of Bill; the latter the narrative level on which the story is *told*. The six Present Moment interruptions into the narrative act as inter-textual codicils that pre-empt the narrator’s anxieties with various, seemingly earnest notes on his own notes: “what was I thinking?!” (63) “There’s a grim bit ahead;” (64) “I can’t believe I’ve missed something so fundamental to the story, or avoided it or whatever, but there you go: I’m no novelist. I apologise for having to clumsily lump this information on you in such a way. And please don’t think there’s something manipulative about my actions. It’s not like there’s anything to gain from holding this back, either. If anything it’s unhelpful.” (84) There is even an apology and rationale included based on the reactions of his interviewees to his murder ‘confession,’ (116) a half-completed prolepsis, the function of which is intended to be comic: he could have just gone back and edited problematic passages. Instead, the narrator attempts to repair faulty mechanisms through rhetorical performances of humility, self-deprecation and exhortation.

If these conceits are successful they are so, in part, through their register: an attempt at sincerity so strenuously displayed they signal a less noble intent. I consider this to be antithetical to the way Wallace uses similar rhetorical manipulations in his non-fiction. Three brief examples:

1. From Wallace’s 2000 essay “Up, Simba,” documenting John McCain’s 2000 Republican nomination campaign: “you probably don’t want to hear about all this, even”: (*Consider the Lobster*, 187) “A better question: do you even give a shit if McCain can or ought to win”; (161) “[...] for me the whole thing ended up being relevant in ways far beyond any one man or magazine. If you don’t agree, I imagine you’ll have only to press a button or two to make it all go away.” (159)
2. “If Derrida and the infamous Deconstructionists have done nothing else, they’ve successfully debunked the idea that speech is language’s primary instantiation. [Footnote:] (Q.v. the “Pharmakon” stuff in Derrida’s *La dissemination* – but you’d probably be better off just trusting me.) (84)
3. “[...] not going to be any profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy [...]” on Updike. (53)

Example one is a selection of the numerous asides directed by Wallace to his ostensible intended reader, the 18-35 *Rolling Stone* magazine customer. This is Wallace at his most sincerely insincere: beginning with the thesis that the identified demographic is disinclined to vote or engage in politics at all, Wallace develops a counter-argument in the essay – that it is effectively impossible *not* to vote in a democracy, choosing not to cast a ballot is merely supporting the status quo – whilst consistently maintaining empathy with the imagined politically apathetic reader. Wallace hedges his argument on a rigged double bind: if one chooses not to participate one is still participating; but if one engages in politics the systems and paradoxes will inevitably disengage you.<sup>1</sup> However, the latter's ostensible futility is a rhetorical feint: Wallace's register in the apathetic asides might fit somewhere between Franzen's low-hipster-vernacular definitions (I would call it 'slacker'), the mock-bravado superficial and unpersuasive. Wallace pulls down the rigging in the final sentence of the essay: "Try to stay awake." (234)

Example two comes from Wallace's essay "Authority and American Usage". In a 2003 interview with the German television station ZDF, Wallace stated that "I'm pretty sure my readers are about as smart as I am." Whether or not this in itself was a sincere comment, the example regarding Derrida is one of the few occasions Wallace overtly acts against this sentiment in his non-fiction: 'trust me, I've done the reading'. While the tone is casual, informal, the assertion is a complex one. Wallace's attempts to establish a community of agreement here with a friendly appeal to good faith.

Example three, provided in full earlier, highlights Wallace's interest in the Intentional Fallacy: "The judging of the meaning or success of the work of art by the author's expressed or ostensible intention in producing it," as defined by Wallace in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky." (259, fn. 7(a)) In what might commonly be referred to as a 'takedown' or 'hatchet job,' Wallace positions himself as the fair-minded critic who is keen to assert the qualities of his subject. Really, this is the establishing of credibility that validates the criticisms that proceed in the review of Updike's novel. To the question of whether sincerity

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly (*Consider David Foster Wallace*, 139) quotes Wallace: "'Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable' (Interview, *Bookworm*, 1996)". That Wallace might set up artificial double binds in his work with the intent of seeing them fall apart is suggestive of how he saw the full potential of rhetoric to buttress moral conviction. In the essay "Consider the Lobster," he asks his intended reader (the reader of food magazine *Gourmet* in this case) "Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?" (243), before spending the following ten pages attentively detailing the trauma of capture, containment and cooking as experienced by a lobster before it becomes a meal. What may seemingly be set up as a double bind quickly reveals itself to be an example of false equivalence. Muddying this argument, admittedly, is the cognitive dissonance DT Max suggests in his biography of Wallace, revealing that "at the [Maine Lobster] festival one evening [...] he enjoyed two lobsters for dinner." (273)

is genuine or a rhetorical performance in Wallace's non-fiction the answer is both: the function of *performed* sincerity is to deliver the sincere *conviction* that underpins the work.

In his fiction, Wallace pointedly approached his topics from the inside. In "The Depressed Person" (*Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, 31-58) the titular character spirals inside the maddening loops of her broken interior logic. In "B.I #2" (77-84) the unnamed male becomes increasingly overt in his misogyny and use of language as an instrument of repressive power (the unanswered repetitions of "sweetie" towards his voiceless interviewer becoming increasingly sinister). In "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" (*Oblivion*, 182-189) the ex-con narrator is incapable of empathy even towards his mother's various plights or his culpability in endangering a child (the blunt, affectless narration itself an affected form of humour). However, Wallace refuses to allow Updike's Turnbull to be anything other than a misogynistic avatar of the author,<sup>1</sup> ironizing his "appealing to the intentional fallacy" remark.

The reference to the Intentional Fallacy in Wallace's review is perhaps not the most accurate term, if one is to take the context of the other "quotations" he provides regarding female opinion of Updike as judging the work as a part of the man: closer might be the less-refined precursor to IF, C.S. Lewis' *Personal Heresy*, "the [...] belief that poetry is or should be the expression of a poet's personality" (*Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 660-661). In the case of the female "literary readers," the writer and the writing represent each other inextricably, the superficial judgement of the work cruder as a result. James Wood, in his criticism of John Updike, is content to deploy a similar method at times.

Wood has published three pieces on Updike, reviews of the novels *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) (with close attention to the novel *Roger's Version* (1986)) and *Terrorist* (2006), and the collection of short stories and novella *Licks of Love* (2001). His opinions have largely been negative, and fit into two categories:

The casually insulting:

"Updike is not, I think, a great writer." (*The Broken Estate*, 228)

"Does Updike reread his own prose?" ("Jihad and the Novel")

"this is his twenty-second novel, for goodness sake"

"Updike's lyric capacities have been praised, and *need not detain us here*. It should go without saying that he is, at best, a fine pupil of Nabokov; and at worst, his prose

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<sup>1</sup> Granted, Updike has form here: one commonality of the GMNs being the inescapable similarity they so often have with their protagonists. As Wallace states, Updike's men are rarely anything other than white protestant males from north-west USA, roughly the age of the author at the time. Roth's "Nathan Zuckerman" resembles his creator closely. Before Mailer's *Armies of the Night* was credited as an early version of the 'nonfiction novel' he'd already published *The Naked and the Dead*, based on his WWII experiences in the South Pacific.



is a harmless, puffy lyricism". (*The Broken Estate*, 227-228) [Italics mine: it is an indication of Wood's attitude to his subject that he can so casually dismiss the "lyric capabilities" so early in his review.]

And a more overt Intentional Fallacy/Personal Heresy:

"This might as well be Ipswich." ("Jihad and the Novel") [Ipswich, Massachusetts, where Updike lived from 1957-76 – remaining in the State until he died.

"[...] it sounds as if Updike is reviewing Clarence's loss of faith for the *New Yorker*, and writing the review at his desk on a fine calm morning in Massachusetts." (*The Broken Estate*, 231)

"as if the narrator were paraphrasing a novel for a *New Yorker* review" ("Gossip in Gilt", 30-31) [The magazine that regularly published Updike for over fifty years.]

"In Updike's defence it is often maintained that these are the thoughts of his characters, not necessarily of their creator. But obsessions of this kind have recurred and overlapped thickly enough in his work to constitute, now, the equivalent of an artist's palette: this is how Updike chooses to paint the world." (31) [Note here, in a similar rhetoric to Wallace, Wood's gambit: let me be fair to the author in this sentence, before I deliver a crushing blow in the next. Both critics are careful not to appear part of a perceived anti-Updike sensibility in contemporary literary culture, Wallace going as far as assuring his readers he must be one of the "few actual subforty Updike fans" (*Consider the Lobster*, 52) – italics his.]

"The very quality of the prose makes us doubt that Frank really exists, since Frank would be very lucky to think in this way. Instead, we are relentlessly drawn back to Updike himself, to the author's verbal talents." [This is Wood at his furthest from the text-focussed New Criticism, a stance Wallace praised in the critical work of Joseph Frank on Dostoevsky.]

This is not to say that either Wood or Wallace – himself or through his female readers – is an unfair or un-nuanced critic of Updike: both take pains to quote his work, unpack meaning, and highlight failures; both identify misogyny and a superficial attention to sex and genitalia; and both, ultimately, identify a lyricism that fails to mask the limits of the author's (Updike's) imagination: the essence of Wallace's and Wood's complaint with Updike is that he fails to create plausibility inside his fictional worlds, whether it be the realities of post-nuclear life (*Towards the End of Time*) or the interior thoughts of a teenage radicalised Muslim (*Terrorist*). Rather, both critics mix rigour and rhetoric to assert their points, whether insisting on an unbiased approach (Wallace) or trivialising the subject's qualities (Wood): the blend of the Intentional Fallacy and rhetorical sincerity, while certainly manipulative, can serve as vehicles for the underlying literary and moral conviction of the critic.

While Wallace chose a form of empiricism to critique Updike, Wood's metier is quotation. In *How Fiction Works*, in the chapter "Detail," Wood conflates the prose of Updike and Nabokov, identifying a style that can "at times freeze detail into a cult of itself."

(62) The Updike passage he quotes to emphasise this point comes from the 1965<sup>1</sup> novella *Of the Farm*, a description of the movement of rainwater on a window with a mesh screen:

Its panes were strewn with drops that as if by amoebic decision would abruptly merge and break and jerkily run downward, and the window screen, like a sampler half-stitched, or a crossword puzzle invisibly solved, was inlaid erratically with minute, translucent tesserae of rain.

Of this noticing of minutiae, Wood warns that “[a]estheticism is the great risk here, and also an exaggeration of the noticing eye.” (62) This observation is lifted almost verbatim from Wood’s 2004 review of Wallace’s *Oblivion* in the *New Republic*, in which he accuses Wallace of a tendency toward Nabokovian-Updikean micro-realism.

In *U & I*, his non-fiction homage to Updike, Nicholson Baker cites the same passage as an example of Updike’s talent, admitting to crying at the “description of raindrops on the window screen like a crossword puzzle or a “sampler half-stitched”: it killed for the time being a patch of screen description of my own, but that didn’t matter, because Updike’s paragraph was so fine that my competitiveness went away,” (171) and, later, “he had lifted it [the detail of rain on the window and screen mesh] from the status of the incidental setting and made its qualities part of the moral power and permanency of his mother’s house [the location of the window]”. (172) This description of lifting, of exalting observation toward the metaphoric, is similar to Wood’s praise of a passage in Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*:

Tommy Wilhelm [protagonist of *Seize the Day*] is running through the health club of a hotel, looking for his elderly father, who is getting a massage. As he rushes from room to room, he briefly catches sight of two old men playing ping-pong; they have just come out of a steam-bath and are wearing towels around their waists: “*They were awkward and the ball bounded high*”. Imagine the youngish writer at his desk. He sees, in his mind’s eye, his protagonist running from room to room; he sees his protagonist notice the two men in their towels. Often with great writers, it is instructive to stop at the point in a sentence, or in a metaphor, or in a perception, where the ordinary writer might come to a halt. The ordinary writer might have Tommy Wilhelm catch sight of the two men playing ping-pong and leave it at that. (“*Two men in towels playing ping-pong.*”) Bellow will not leave it at that. He sees that the men are made awkward by their towels and, as a consequence, they are playing ineptly. Fearful that their towels will slip, they are just pretending to play - and so “*the ball bounded high*”. (*The Nearest Thing to Life*, loc. 513 of 5197)

In Bellow, Wood finds that the extension of the scene, the attention to detail, is the difference between an ordinary writer and a great one, in the same way Baker compares Updike’s paragraph to an inferior one of his own and another by Elizabeth Bishop.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Wood incorrectly dates publication at 1961

<sup>2</sup> “and when I found that Elizabeth Bishop’s 1948 New Yorker short story called ‘The Housekeeper’ also had a screen whose clinging raindrops ‘fill[ed] the squares with cross-stitch effects that came

distinction between the two is that one critic (Baker) sees in the slowing of narrative to attend to detail the potential of expansion into the metaphoric, while for the other (Wood) it only succeeds if the detail expands or adds nuance to character. This distinction, to my mind, is where criticism experiences limits as an objective practice and becomes a matter of taste. As Martin Amis discusses in the introduction to his non-fiction collection *The War Against Cliché*:

Gallingly for the lit-crit imperialists, there is no means for distinguishing the excellent from the less excellent. The most muscular literary critics on earth have no equipment for establishing that

*Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears*

is a better line than

*When all at once I saw a crowd*

- and if they did, they would have to begin by saying that the former contains a dead expletive ('do') brought in to sustain the metre. (*The War Against Cliché*, xv.)<sup>1</sup>

The anxieties of different critical approaches – how the Intentional Fallacy may or may not be effectively deployed; the extent a critic may wish to display sincerity; the degree to which detail can be interpreted as metaphor; whether or not a sentence is moving – are all considered in *The Gospel of Something or Other*: the Notes sections that follow Bill's narratives address both the text – aided (or hampered) by the Hawk and Checkhardt references – and provide a biography (of sorts) of the narrator. However, unlike in Wallace's and Wood's rhetoric, the function of the conceit in the novel is not to support conviction but rather to mask a different anxiety, that of absence.

As the Notes progress, the 'STORYTELLING' entries – ostensibly text-focussed critiques – become less frequent, the final Notes section dispensing with them altogether. The narrator, in Appendix Two, is criticised by the Old Detective for this dwindling, accused of losing interest in the "fidelity of [his] conceit." (127) The interview with the Old Detective provides a clue as to why the dwindling occurs by identifying the points in which Bill's story switches from the documenting of the narrator's actual movements after Emily's death to a more fictionalised account.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the breaking down of the narrator's analysis is not due to a lack of fidelity to the conceit but a lack of fidelity to the true story. The performance of sincerity and rigour in

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and went,' this parallel only demonstrated to me how much more Updike could do with the same piece of reality," (171-172)

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately for Amis, his claim, four sentences later, that "when I dispraise, I am usually quoting clichés" is undermined by the clichéd "war" of his title.

<sup>2</sup> 131-133, specifically the answers prompted by the narrator's questions "Did I get it just like it was?" and "Did you like the ending? Of the story?"

addressing the Bill text (albeit largely parodically) becomes less frequent as the insincerity of Bill's story increases. One purpose of the character interviews in the appendices and the 'Omissions' section of the novel is to highlight the extent to which the narrator has purposely complicated his relating of the events that have brought him to his 'present moment'. The failure in Part Two of the novel is contained in the fictionalising of felt experience, the intentional complicating of story, and thus Bill's story breaks down along with the narrator's self-analysis.

A reasonable question to the narrator is: why lie? A reasonable question to the author is: why set up a failure?

### *Necessary Deceptions*

In *The Nearest Thing to Life*, Wood discusses Chekhov's short story "The Kiss," in which an unimpressive staff-captain, Ryabovich, attends a party in a stately house and, in a case of mistaken identity, receives a brief kiss from an unknown woman in a room too dark for each to clearly see the other. Wood writes:

The incident grows in size and importance in the young soldier's mind. He has never kissed a woman before. In the ballroom he looks at each of the women in turn, and convinces himself that she was the one. That night, when he goes to bed, he has the sensation that 'someone had been kind to him and made him happy, that something unusual, absurd, but extremely good and full of joy, had taken place in his life.' (Loc. 329 of 1597)

When Ryabovich – shy, lacking in confidence – decides to share his experience with colleagues he is disappointed to learn his story does not carry the excitement he felt in the dark room and over the proceeding days:

He does tell it, and a minute later falls silent. Because it only took him a minute to tell. And Ryabovich is amazed, writes Chekhov, 'to find that the story had taken such a short time. He had thought he could go on talking about the kiss all night.' (329 of 1597)

*The Gospel of Something or Other* had already been completed when I read this, and it is one of a number of occasions (another is to be mentioned shortly) when I have detected "a vibe, a kind of perfume of sensibility," in my own writing that pre-empts my reading of it in Wood's criticism: the fictional scaffolding the narrator erects in the novel is because he, unlike Ryabovich, is aware of the lack of drama his story contains. His attempt to dramatize the banal, to critique his own work, disseminate it among the pitifully few people in his life for their opinion, is his attempt to repress the acknowledgement that his story is a simple one (which told in full takes up only 1/8th of the novel): a failed marriage; a puerile public embarrassment; a voyeuristic attitude towards sex; a fixation on a woman he didn't know; a

suicide; an unimpressive career; and a dysfunctional romantic relationship. The life events that ignited the desire to tell a story are a selection of common tropes in fiction. As a character who tells monologues of his life for people who had paid to laugh, he is more aware than most of the potential for a story to be unimportant to all but the teller, hence his elevating the story to be one worthy of critical discussion and reader response.

### *Necessary Failures*

In earlier iterations of this essay, the following segue into Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" was an awkward one: his influence on the shape of the novel is important, but bringing him into the conversation felt abrupt. Then, in April 2015, James Wood published *The Nearest Thing to Life*, in which he writes: "I thought of Walter Benjamin's argument is his essay 'The Storyteller,' that classic storytelling is structured around death. It is, as it were, the fire at which listeners warm their hands. Death provides the storyteller's authority. It is death, says Benjamin, that makes a story transmissible." (Loc. 105 of 1597) This comes to Wood's mind after attending the funeral of a friend's younger brother. He states "At the service, I was struck by the thought that death gives us the awful privilege of seeing a life whole".

This "awful privilege" is indeed something the narrator claims to receive (although it is more accurate to say he took it) in the sense of a duty to preserve Emily in words. However, it is the distinction Benjamin makes between the novel and the storyteller that most influences the structure of *The Gospel of Something or Other*.

Rather as Wallace and Wood can use a single author review to expound their literary convictions, Benjamin uses discussion of the work of Russian writer Nikolai Leskov as a means of asserting that the demise of the storyteller has resulted in a deficiency in the ability to communicate wisdom, "the counsel woven into the fabric of real life". (*Illuminations*, 86) Consider the essay's opening passage along with Ryabovich's dilemma in "The Kiss":

Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant. To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him. Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision. This distance and this angle of vision are prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that

seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (83)

While being acutely aware of, and attempting to avoid, the dilemma of Ryabovich, the narrator realises another dilemma: how can one make a human connection through the structural confines of the novel?

Both Wood and Wallace consider the novel a valuable communal tool: Wood, crediting it for allowing a reader “formal insight into the shape of someone’s life” (Loc. 204 of 1597) (another occasion in which Wood declines to use the word ‘empathy’); while Wallace, in conversation with Larry McCaffery, stated that “[T]rue empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character’s pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with their own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple.” Three years later he made a similar comment in an interview with *Salon*: “There’s a kind of Ah-ha [when reading fiction]! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn’t happen all the time. It’s these brief flashes or flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone — intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I’m in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don’t with other art.” (*Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, 62)

These views differ somewhat from Benjamin’s assertion, that a reader’s engagement with the novel is a private affair, not communal, and so an attempt to use the novel to understand the sum of another’s life becomes a disconnected experience:

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life’s fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom. (87)

When reflected back onto the author, I believe this anxiety is one of intent. For the narrator of the *GoSoO*, who is the creator of the fictions within, the desire to exalt his story into drama, and for that drama to be understood by his small community – to make it “the

experience of those who are listening” – are his ambitions. However, the information contained in the novel is inconsistent. The revelation that Jess is the narrator’s estranged wife; the confession of adolescent murder; the withholding of the nature of the ‘ignominy’: it is only after the Omissions section, when the narrator’s artifice – which clogs and bottlenecks at the end of Bill’s story – is finally shed. While the Omissions hopefully allow a reader to identify – through the assorted failures and abandonments – a narrative thread that exposes the narrator’s vulnerability, it also functions as a moment of catharsis: only after he rids himself of the conceits with which he attempted to buttress his story is he able to reach a conclusion.

The fictions created out of desperation, designed to instigate feeling through deception, ultimately fail. The failures, a convoluted series of literary techniques, aim to identify the anxiety of understanding that one’s own story is often a simple, unoriginal and undramatic, and how one might struggle to make these simple stories matter to others.

Wallace and Wood each assert that fiction, and the novel, provide an edifying insight into a human life and the human condition. When they see it fail, as in Updike, it is a failure of fidelity to the fictional world, an author unable to sustain the necessary “artifice and verisimilitude” (*How Fiction Works*, 2) or Wallace’s “kind of ah-ha!” *The Gospel of Something or Other* attempts to decipher the desire to construct an artifice, or create the brief “ah-ha” moment. It is not an acknowledgement that fiction can be a salve for loneliness but an identification that the creative impulse stems from a kind of loneliness.





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